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THE RANGE DEFENDER

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This is the Story

A STRANGER rode into Cache Basin with two of the finest horses that a Westerner could hope to set eyes on. He was just looking round, he said, but Cache Basin, that isolated, mysterious country where the echo of a wild past came near being an actuality, was certainly a queer place to choose. In its heart lay Hatcher's Shebang, one of the biggest hang-outs of a gang of road agents less than forty years ago. Old Hatcher himself was reported to have been in that gang, and the stranger began to believe the truth of it. His horses disappeared during his first night's camp in the basin and next morning he saw their shoes hanging up in old Hatcher's smithy. Lead flew. The stranger drew blood and only got away with his life by the intervention of Hatcher's daughter. Stranger Joe quit, but he left his saddle with the Hatcher girl and promised to call back for it ! Mr. Robertson never fails to give us that tingling of the blood that makes the first-class Western yarn as exhilarating as it is entertaining.



By the Same Author

THE BANDIT OF BAYHORSE BASIN

THE FOREMAN OF THE FORTY BAR

THE HIDDEN CABIN

THE FAR HORIZON

WILD HORSE HENDERSON

DEADMAN'S GROVE

BRAND OF THE OPEN HAND

RIDERS OF THE SUNSET TRAIL

THE BOSS OF THE TUMBLING H

THE BOSS OF THE DOUBLE E

THE SILVER COW

THE MAN BRANDERS

THE MORMON TRAIL

THE BOSS OF THE FLYING M

THE BOSS OF THE TEN MILE BASIN

THE RANGE DEFENDER

by

FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of, "Deadman's Grove," "The Bandit of
Bayhorse Basin," etc.



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CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER

FOR many a day the stranger had carefully avoided all beaten trails. Now he crashed through the under-brush and plumped squarely upon the temporary camp of a pair of 3C riders. There was no chance to withdraw, and he had to make the best of it. He drew the flea-bitten gray horse he was riding to a halt, and reached over to pet the neck of the dappled brown which packed his camp outfit, while he waited for the waddies to voice their view upon his intrusion.

One of the waddies was a rotund little fellow with a genial, affable smile whom the stranger liked at sight.

"Hallo, stranger," he greeted cordially, "just in time to have a bite o' supper with us."

The stranger quickwittedly made the best of the situation. He swung off his horse, and advanced to the fire. "I'm sure hungry enough to appreciate a hot supper," he told the waddies.

"Shore, shore," the little puncher acquiesced cheerfully. "Make yerself to home. My name's Benny Vest; t'other feller's Jim Biglar." He paused invitingly.

"Just call me Joe," the stranger responded, with a friendly smile.

The man called Biglar glanced up suspiciously, but if Benny Vest was disconcerted he did not show it.

"That's all right," Benny said. "A feller don't need to tell more'n he wants to, an' I want comp'ny. Biglar's like a statue."

"Where ye from?" Biglar demanded, none too courteously.

The stranger smiled. He had no desire to make enemies of these friends of a night. Therefore he answered Biglar with the utmost frankness.

"Past three months I've been ridin' on the Chub Springs Range in South-Eastern Idaho."

It was a casual remark, and Benny Vest, at least, accepted it just as casually. Yet days later Benny was to remember that remark, and give another stranger keen satisfaction by doing so. Just now, however, his curiosity lay in what the stranger was doing in those mountains.

"What in thunder are ye doin' kittled away off up here?" he demanded, adding another hunk of bacon to the frying pan as the stranger's portion.

As they talked the stranger was unsaddling his horses. They were remarkable animals, those horses. The gray was named Freckles, and the brown Pilot. Either horse would come to his master at the call of his name, or his whistle, and they followed him like dogs. They were of hardy, cayuse blood in appearance, but they also bore the marks

of Arabian ancestors. They were horses that instantly caught and held the eye of every horseman. The stranger was a connoisseur of horses, and it had taken long searching and much money to get two that just suited him.

"I'm just looking around," he told Benny.

Benny dodged the smoke, and studied the dark, soft-spoken stranger. He was frankly puzzled.

"Well, you're gittin' a long way from civilisation," he stated.

"Is this the end of things?" The stranger smiled.

"Of course, there's ranches on the other side o' the big divide, an' there's minin' camps aroun' Butte an' Anaconda, an' I reckon you kin find some damn fools clear to the North Pole, but these mountains ahead o' you come as near bein' plumb centre o' nowhere as any place on earth, I reckon."

"Then I take it you boys ain't going any further up this way?"

"No furder, buddy. Our hangout's 'bout fifty mile below here on the Eagle Butte Range. We're just up here lookin' fer a few sour-headed dogeys that mighta strung off up here."

"Then there's no use of me going any farther in this direction in search of a job," the man who called himself Joe said, more in an attempt to explain his presence than anything else.

"Then you'd better go back with us," Benny advised promptly. "Fur as I know this trail from Stanley up here is the only one there is, an' it kittles off over another big divide into Cache Basin, an'

by Hatcher's Shebang—which is a danged good place to stay away frum."

The stranger was not greatly interested in trails. He had dodged the town of Stanley, and made his way this far without a trail. He could continue, if necessary; but his curiosity was aroused.

"What is this Hatcher's Shebang?"

"Ain't ye never heard tell o' Hatcher's Shebang?" demanded the waddy with amazement.

"I'm afraid not," Joe confessed.

"Why, Great Scott! Hatcher's Shebang was s'posed to be one of the biggest hangouts o' the Bunton gang o' road agents forty years ago. Bein' plumb off the trail they used to hide up the stuff they stole there, which give the place the name o' Cache Basin. They always called the place they stayed at a 'shebang,' an' somehow the vigilantes overlooked ole Bim Hatcher when they cleaned up the gang, an' he located there; so they call his place Hatcher's Shebang," Benny explained carefully.

"They didn't even know that Bunton had a shebang there until after the vigilantes disbanded, and they never did prove that ole Hatcher was a member of it," Jim Biglar spoke up.

"Just the same ev'rybody knows what old Bim an' his boys are in there fur, an' people let's 'em alone," Benny maintained, with a flush.

"You say this trail goes to that place?" Joe murmured softly.

"Yeah. It goes to the top of a divide, an' way off across you see a notch in the mountains. Ye go

through that notch an' drop down into the basin. There's another notch on the other side, an' them's the only ways in or out. You don't want to go in there, stranger, fer that's the lonesomest, most isolated place in these here mountains," Benny Vest pointed out earnestly.

The stranger made no reply. He was staring ahead towards the place where this relic of road agent days was supposed to be. Somehow the place attracted him—not because of its reputation, for the days of road agents were long since past, and the far and ill-famed Bunton gang was all but forgotten—but because of its isolation. He knew that he could not always avoid his fellow men, nor did he want to. But in a place like this he might find contentment and security, and a place to invest safely the twenty thousand dollars that reposed in a money belt worn next to his skin. Benny Vest watched him anxiously with one eye, while the other was fixed warily upon a slippery piece of bacon he was trying to spear in the frying pan.

"Stranger," said Benny, "if you go in there with that pair o' hosses you'd just as well kiss 'em good-bye. Bim Hatcher'll git his eyes on 'em, an' right soon you'll be afoot."

"It doesn't appear to be a very enticing place to go to," Joe agreed. "Still, I think I'll ride that way and look the place over."

"Then avoid the Hatchers," was Benny's advice. "An' if ye change yer mind an' want work, jus' hunt up the 3C outfit, an' ask for Benny Vest."

The talk fell into commonplace range matters until bed time ; nor did Benny resume his argument in the morning. He watched curiously when the man swung on to Freckles, and heaved a conscience-free sigh as the stranger took the upward trail.

"Good-bye," he called out ; then, dropping his voice, he commented to his partner, "There's some men you can't tell nothin' to."

"But they can't nobody ever claim that you didn't try to tell 'im all about it—whether you knew anything about it yourself or not," Biglar replied dryly.

The friendly visit with the waddies had brought the stranger nearly back to normal. He began to see how foolish he had been in his recent attempts to avoid people. He now stuck to the trail ; though, in reality, there was little chance that he would meet any one else.

At noon he was on the top of the divide Benny Vest had told him about. The trail seemed to lose itself in a wild labyrinth of timber-covered ridges, canyons, and gorges that merged into a high, serrated range of mountains which was, in turn, dominated by the higher, snow-capped peaks of the Continental Divide. But some fifteen miles to the eastward was a deep gash cleft between two of the peaks in the spur range, which he judged to be the notch which Benny had told about. He stopped and enjoyed his noon hour at the first creek, then followed the dim trail in its plunge into the wilderness. For a couple of hours his view of the surround-

ing country was limited. Then he found himself in a wide, shallow canyon, and an hour's riding brought him to the head of it ; or rather to where it merged into a deeper one, for he now found himself in the notch he had seen from afar. At the bottom it was not more than forty feet wide, and so steep were the sides that at the top of the notch, some two thousand feet above, the width was not more than two hundred feet.

For nearly a quarter of a mile the solitary rider followed along the almost level trail. Then, with amazing abruptness, the flanking mountains flared out to right and left, and he found himself on a narrow rim of rocky soil overlooking a circular valley some six or seven miles in diameter. Rows of perpendicular peaks walled the basin and jutted savagely into the air imposing an impenetrable barrier, except for another notch opposite the one he had entered. This notch was seemingly cut level with the bottom of the basin, and apparently opened out into a lower country, for the whole basin seemed to tip in that direction.

The floor of Cache Basin itself would have been described as mountainous in any less rugged surroundings ; being little else than a wild labyrinth of hills, meadows and gulches. Strips and patches of timber, pine, tamarack, fir and cedar grew here and there, adding their splotches of colour. At this season of the year the basin ranged in colour from darkest blue to a beautiful light buff.

The stranger contemplated the scene before him

for a few minutes ; then began the descent into the basin proper. But as he clambered down the steep trail he observed, with the skilled eye of a trained cattleman, the possibilities of the basin as a cow country. A drift fence across each of the gaps in the mountains and the cattle would be the same as in a corral. As he got down into the basin proper he wondered why he saw no cattle. It was getting late in the afternoon and the animals should be coming out of the timber, but none appeared.

He rode on, and just at dusk plumped squarely upon a stake-and-rider fence. There was a cumbersome set of bars across the trail which apparently were little used. The lone rider, however, dismounted and led his horses through them. Then he remounted and rode on.

A quarter of a mile farther on he met a solitary rider. The fellow veered wide, and rode with head tucked low, so that his face was practically undiscernible in the gloom. However, his eyes were busy, for Joe could feel, rather than see, the minute inspection which the fellow gave him.

"Howdy, stranger," Joe greeted.

He was answered by an unintelligible grunt, and the rider passed on. Evidently sociability was not the rule in Cache Basin. Glancing back over his shoulder Joe surprised the other man doing the same thing—but the eyes of the surly rider were fixed, not upon the other man, but upon his horses. The owner, however, had become so used to men admiring his two pets that he thought nothing of it.

Half a mile more brought him to a cluster of log buildings surrounded by a high stockade fence, the poles of which were now rotten and falling down. In the centre of the stockade was one building higher than the rest. A light gleamed from an upstairs window, and save for this there seemed to be no sign of life.

There seemed something almost uncanny about the place as it lay there in the half-light of dusk at the foot of a purplish, timber-clad hill, with its background of stern, inaccessible crags frowning down from above.

There seemed to be more than a dozen long, low buildings inside the stockade in addition to the one where the light gleamed. Those next to the creek, which ran through one side of the stockade, appeared to be stables, and were surrounded by corrals and stockyards connected by chutes and runways. From one of these stables a horse neighed.

"Hatcher's Shebang, quite obviously," Joe mused. His mind roved back through the years as he tried to conjure up in his imagination the scenes of stormy life that must have been enacted there. Then he remembered the word of the waddy that one of those men who had participated in the tumultuous past still lived here. A curiosity to see this relic of a lawless past mastered him. He prepared to dismount.

He swung off, and recoiled a step. A man stood before him—a man who apparently had materialised on the spot, so noiseless had been his approach.

Joe was a man of average height, but he was obliged to look up at this man who towered at least six feet and a half in his boots. A long, narrow, iron-gray beard flowed down to the man's waist, and a pair of stringy, but sinewy arms were folded across his chest under the beard. A pair of deep-set, luminous black eyes stared menacingly down upon the intruder.

"Stranger, what air ye a'doin' hyar?" the apparition asked in a deep, rumbling voice charged with hostility.

"I'm merely passing through, and I stopped to ask if I could stop here for the night."

"You can't," replied the old man instantly. He raised his voice. "Hunt. You show this feller to the south gate." He swung on his heel and was gone; but his place was taken by a younger man who had evidently been waiting close by.

Joe glanced curiously at this new man. He was slightly above six feet in height, and considerably heavier than the old man; yet even in the dusk it could be seen that the general cast of their features was the same.

"Follow me," the younger fellow ordered curtly.

Because there seemed nothing else to do, Joe mounted Freckles and followed his new guide toward the corrals. Hunt disappeared in a stable, but reappeared in a moment leading a saddled and bridled horse. Without a word he swung on, rode through an opening in the stockade fence and set off down the road.

Joe spurred alongside his guide, and attempted to strike up a conversation.

"I am looking for a place called Hatcher's Shebang. Can you tell me about where it is?"

Hunt turned his head slowly, and regarded his questioner with no attempt to conceal his suspicion.

"We're just leavin' it," he said calmly.

"You don't seem to care for company—at Hatcher's Shebang," the stranger hazarded.

"Not a bit." The reply was curt, final.

They reached a gate through the remarkably strong stake-and-rider fence, and Hunt, without dismounting, opened the gate and turned his horse aside for his companion to pass through.

Joe herded Pilot through ahead of him, and as he rode behind he saw that Hunt's eyes were fixed upon the two splendid horses with a sort of fascination. He did not in the least expect Hunt to volunteer any further remarks, but he was mistaken.

"You'll find a creek about three hundred yards to yer left, an' a ways down it you'll come to some dead timber that'll give ye all the firewood you'll need—an' there's plenty of good horse feed not far below."

"All right—thanks," Joe replied.

Hunt closed the gate, and jogged back along the way they had come. Joe watched him curiously; taking note that he rode unhurriedly in the accepted jog-trot of cowland, and that he sat his horse easily and gracefully.

"Right there goes one able specimen," the

stranger commented to himself. Then he neck-reined Freckles lightly to the left, and sought the camp ground Hunt had told about.

He quickly found the place, and discovered that Hunt had told the truth. The place contained the three necessary requisites of a good camping spot—wood, water and horse feed. He unsaddled his horses and turned them loose. Hundreds of nights with them had taught him that they were to be trusted implicitly. No matter how poor the grass they were never so far away in the morning that they could not hear their master's whistle, and come eagerly to camp.

His mind at ease on that score he chopped some dry wood with his hand axe, and soon had cooking his supper of coffee, bacon, canned corn, and baking powder biscuits. After supper he sat by the dying embers of his camp-fire, and smoked for half an hour before rolling into his blankets. Naturally his mind dwelt upon the strange reception he had received at Hatcher's Shebang, but his mind was not in the least bitter. Rather, he was amused. It was simply an odd episode to remember and smile over. It was a mere whim that had taken him there, and perhaps it was a whim of old man Hatcher that had sent him on. Nobody hurt. In the morning he would ride on.

In the morning a sunbeam, like a smiling imp of mischief, pierced its way through the bush behind which Joe had made his bed, and fell upon his cheek. Light as it was it caused him to open his eyes.

Then he smiled, and sat up, emitting a piercing whistle to call his horses. He dressed hurriedly, built a fire, and washed his hands and face in the clear, cold creek. Then he began preparing breakfast. His horses should have been there by that time, and he glanced around a little impatiently. He whistled again, and went on with his cooking operations. The coffee boiled, yet the horses had not come. He could no longer refuse to recognise the fact that something must have happened to them.

Reaching for his bridle he set off down the creek at a fast walk. From time to time he emitted his calling whistle, but there was not even an echo to mock him, let alone the friendly nicker with which his horses invariably greeted him. It was not hard, at first, to trace their course down the creek by the nipped off bunchgrass. Then this ceased, and he had to depend upon following their tracks, which was difficult to do owing to the rank, springy grass, which erased most of the tracks as soon as made. His horses were shod, however, and he managed to track them. Then he discovered that there were also the tracks of a bare-footed horse with them.

He spent a full half-hour on hands and knees in a space not exceeding a hundred yards either way. When he finally got to his feet he knew positively that within that space Freckles and Pilot had been roped, and led away.

CHAPTER II

" ARE YOU MIXIN' WAR MEDICINE ? "

THE wanderer could not have been dealt a harder blow—even in a well-settled country where other good horses were obtainable. There was a grim cast to his face as he stared at the tracks of the third horse. He shifted the holster which hung at his hip to a trifle easier position ; then his hand flashed there and up in a single swift motion that defied the eye to follow. He fired instantaneously apparently without aim, at a willow branch an inch in diameter swaying lightly back and forth in the slight morning breeze some twenty feet away. A streak of white appeared on one side of it where the bark was gashed. Two more shots followed almost as a single concussion side by side of the first, and the long, slender willow branch toppled and fell, completely and cleanly severed.

He quietly reloaded the gun, and placed it back in its holster ; then he began to follow the tracks with all the skill of which he was capable. It was hard, wearying work, for more often than not no sign would be left in the dense grass. But by pains-taking effort he was able to follow them. In fact, it appeared that the horse thief banked on the grass destroying the tracks, for he made no particular

effort to obliterate the trail. They zig-zagged back and forth with some cunning for a short distance, but then doubled back and led almost in a straight line to the gate to which Hunt Hatcher had escorted the stranger the night before.

Not until that moment did Joe remember how Hunt Hatcher's black eyes had dwelt and glistened upon the two horses. It was almost too obvious. Hunt had overstepped the usual bounds of hospitality of the shebang in telling him where to camp for the express purpose of knowing where to find the horses. The carelessness with which he had manoeuvred the theft amounted almost to insolence. The dust in the gate was too deep and loose for tracks, but a few feet away he discovered the plain imprint of the shoes on his horses' feet.

He heard horses running, and looking up hastily, he saw a band of semi-wild horses being swept into the road just ahead of him, and driven on toward the corrals. He had a fairly good look at the two lanky riders behind them, and it was easy to identify them as sons of the old man at the shebang.

The horses were swept on past the stockade, making it look obvious that they had been driven along the road solely to obliterate the tracks that were already there.

Joe plodded up the road toward the shebang, and entered the stockade. He entered the first corral, and finding it empty, passed on through them all and through the stables. He saw neither men

nor horses. His anger was as strictly elemental as that of the cave man at the theft of his war club. No financier, suddenly left high and dry by the collapse of a trusted bank, can feel more bitterly helpless than a cowboy bereft of his horse.

Coming out of the stables Joe began the inspection of the other scattered log buildings. One glance inside the first one showed him that it was a blacksmith shop. He was about to withdraw when his eye chanced to fall upon a row of horse shoes racked upon an iron rod. Eight of them on one end of the rack were bright as silver. The lack of rust denoted that they had just been pulled off horses' feet. He stepped hastily inside and examined them. He recognised them instantly as the shoes that had been on his own horses.

He had shod and reshod his horses many times with those same shoes, and they had been worn until the calks had become mere stubs—one reason why they were so hard to track. He knew that he could not be mistaken. Both horses were as gentle as kittens, and it would be but the work of a few minutes for any one to pull off the shoes with a pair of pincers. The object seemed plain as day. The thieves figured that the owner of the horses would be looking for shod tracks, and so would not notice barefoot ones.

In a cold fury Joe turned to go out, determined that the residence would be the next place he would explore. But before he reached the door he came face to face with old Bim Hatcher. The lank old

man had to stoop as he crossed the door sill. Crouching there, his long arms dangling beside the two guns he wore, his inky eyes blazing, he was a figure charged with menace.

"What air ye a-doin' inside my blacksmith shop?" he rasped.

"I want my property," Joe replied in a hard voice. He half-turned, and swept the eight horse shoes on to one arm—his left. "This is part of it—the horses they came off of is the rest."

A moment they glared into each other's eyes. Then Bim Hatcher spoke coldly and distinctly, "Put back them shoes."

"When I find my horses I'll put them back on their feet—if I choose to," Joe challenged evenly.

Bim Hatcher leaped forward as his guns were leaping from their holsters. Before either one was raised, however, he stopped, and his iron-gray beard dropped two inches toward his waist line as the chin it was suspended from sagged with surprise. He had met a man quicker on the draw than he was himself. In his astonishment words failed him. The stranger smiled and started forward to disarm his opponent. As yet he wanted only his horses, and he had no desire to cloud his departure with a killing. But before he could take a step forward another voice spoke behind him.

"Stan' still there, stranger. I'm aimin' right square at the middle of yer back."

Too late he remembered that there was a window in the shop behind him. He knew that the voice

belonged to Hunt Hatcher, and that he was not to be trifled with. For a moment the tableau lasted while the actors seemed trying to determine upon the next step to take.

Joe began slowly backing up toward one corner of the shop. He remembered that about six feet behind him was a huge stump upon which rested a hundred and fifty pound anvil. If he could drop behind that without being shot he would be under cover from both men for a while at least. He reached the block, and the men had not discovered the reason for his manœuvre. Rather, they figured they had him cornered.

"Drop that gun," Hunt snarled.

"Hardly," the intruder refused with a short, hard laugh. "You may shoot me in the back right enough, but you can't keep the reflex action of my finger from taking your father over the hump with me."

By their silence he knew that he had scored. His revolver did not waver from Bim Hatcher's heart.

"Reckon we'll have to wait till George an' Dave gits hyar," old Bim said composedly. "If he shoots me you kill him dead."

Joe realised that he must fight his way out before these reinforcements arrived unless he made an abject surrender. Suddenly he dropped behind the anvil block, knees and head bending at the same time. He risked his life upon Hunt's inaction for the fraction of a second it took him to duck, and he

was successful, although a bullet struck the top of the anvil.

Joe fired at the window without exposing his head. He was rewarded with a howl of rage and pain from Hunt. The next moment the air seemed to be alive with lead as old Bim Hatcher began throwing bullets at the anvil block. Bim Hatcher was coming toward the anvil, and his great height would enable him to see over the top of it. But as he stepped forward the toe of one boot fell under the range of Joe's eye. The next moment the old man bounded back toward the door with a surprised yell. Another leap took him outside.

The besieged man knew that he had not bettered his position in the least by the exchange of shots, although he had cleared the room. His plans for his next action were cut short by a sharp, but unmistakably feminine voice outside the cabin.

"What's all this shootin' for?" demanded the voice.

"Thet damn skunk that was hyar las' night was tryin' to rob the shop," Bim Hatcher explained.

"What of?" demanded the woman's voice with a touch of scorn.

"He had a string o' hoss shoes," Bim declared.

"I wanta see a man that 'ud git smoked up fer a measly set of horse shoes," the woman said.

Evidently she was heading for the door, for Hunt's voice was lifted warningly. "Look out, Sis, he's a fightin' fool. He marked us both."

"Oh, piffle, I ain't afraid of him," exclaimed the

woman. The next moment she stepped inside the blacksmith shop where she stood for a moment trying to make out the trespasser through the powder smoke which still lingered heavily in the air. The stranger was on his feet with his hat in his hand, and his gun in his belt before the girl could make him out. The thing he noticed about her first was that her hand was on a very business-like revolver that swung low on her hip.

"I beg to say that you are perfectly safe, ma'am," he assured her.

"Of course I am," she asserted.

She was a tall girl, slim, and lithely moulded as a boy. She wore a wide, slouch hat, and a big braid of blue-black hair fell from under it. Her riding skirt and jacket were of well worn, dingy corduroy, bound together at the waist by a heavy gun belt of black leather. Joe sought her face with something of expectation. He was not disappointed in finding her picturesque, and her pert, piquant features were decidedly pretty; yet he did experience a feeling of disappointment because every line of her face betrayed the Hatcher mould. Like her father and her brother, Hunt, her eyes were her most distinguishing feature—so deep and dark that they sparkled like wells of living flame. With his delicate sensitiveness Joe thought that he read in them a hint of discontent—or wistfulness.

"What's the row about?" she demanded.

"I told ye we caught him prowlin'. That's enough," her father growled.

"What's your story?" she demanded.

"I saw these horse shoes of mine in here, and came in to get them," he said evenly.

"We're not petty thieves," the girl said bluntly.

"If we committed larceny at all it's grand. If we stole them shoes it's a cinch there was horses attached to 'em at the time."

"Lane, clar out o' this," old Bim thundered.

"He was spyin' on us, an' when we caught him at it he jus' claimed them shoes as a bluff."

"Lemme see them shoes," Lane demanded coolly. She advanced and picked up the shoes where the trespasser had dropped them beside the anvil block.

"Did he have these shoes when he come in here, pap?" she asked.

"Naw, he didn't," the senior Hatcher declared promptly. "I been watchin' him from the time he fust hit inside the stockade."

"Then how did these shoes git in here?" the girl inquired.

"How do I know? Been thar all the time, I s'pose," her father snorted peevishly.

"No, they hain't, pap," Lane contradicted, with a grin. "Them shoes wasn't there at sundown last night 'cause I was in here lookin' fer a set to have Hunt nail on to Banjo to-day."

Bim Hatcher scratched his head. "Know anythin' about hit, Hunt?" he inquired.

Hunt had now come around to the door. Blood was trickling down his face from a shallow, red furrow across his cheek.

"No, I don't. What difference does it make?" he demanded angrily.

"None whatever," old Bim agreed. "Stranger," he rasped, "we air a-lettin' ye off easy when we tell ye you kin pull yer freight. It's the fust time any man ever marked up a Hatcher an' got away with it. I believe you shot my little toe clean off, an' Hunt is marked to his dyin' day. We don't stan' fer no spy work around hyar, but you kin drift if ye do it fast enough."

"Just a minute," Joe said quietly. "Since Miss Hatcher seems to understand the situation perfectly, there need be no holding back on her account. These horse shoes were on my horses last night. Now they are in your shop, and my horses are gone. I want an explanation."

Bim Hatcher glared at him suspiciously. "I know nothin' about hit—an' I wouldn't explain to you if I did. We let other people stric'ly alone in this heah shebang, an' we expect them to let us alone," he announced.

"There's enough evidence to make me hold you responsible for the loss of my horses," Joe said. "You have me at a disadvantage now, but I'm going to keep on your trail till I get my horses, or convict you of the theft."

His eyes bored into those of Bim Hatcher, each man bristling defiantly.

"I don't care what you do after you git offen my ranch, but if ye ever set foot inside my fence ag'in we'll kill ye on sight," Hatcher warned. To

make sure that he was properly understood he asked, "Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Joe said heatedly. He was balked at the beginning. Quite obviously he could not continue the search for his horses in Hatcher's shebang under present circumstances. He stepped outside, and walked back the way he had come. He had practically forgotten the girl till her voice arrested him.

"If you follow the creek about two miles, then turn to your left where the trail passes around a big, dead fir-tree, cross over the ridge, an' follow that trail about three miles you'll come to a ranch," she directed.

"Lane," Bim Hatcher roared, "damme if I don't take you a back-handed slap in the mouth."

Joe started back, but the girl waved him away, flashing him an undaunted smile.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, miss," he said, lifting his hat.

He returned to his camp of the night before, and hung his outfit, excepting his rifle, in a tree. The saddle was too heavy to carry on his back for five miles. The only thing left for him to do, apparently, was to find this other ranch, learn what he could of the strange people at Hatcher's shebang, then act on his own resources.

He knew that he must be miles from any semblance of the law, and he surmised that it would be hard to get any action in this remote region, if there were officers of the law within reach. Legally, he could

not prove by either written or oral evidence that he had ever owned a horse. Above all he knew that haste must be his main dependency, for the horses were very likely to be taken out of the country at once. All depended upon what sort of people he should find at this other ranch.

After he had walked what he judged to be two miles down the creek—and they were long, weary ones to a man not used to walking—he found the tree where the girl had told him the road changed—and the girl.

She was sitting on a dead log, her small, booted feet swinging. Her wonderfully transforming smile lighted up her face as she saw him.

"Surprised to see me, ain't you?" she asked cheerfully.

"I'll admit it," he replied.

"I used a short cut on you, an' then I had to ride like sin to head you off," she explained breezily. "You see, I had to wash the blood off o' Hunt, an' bandage up pap's toe; so by the time I got my horses, an' found where you'd left your saddle I had to sift right along."

Then he saw that his own saddle was on a small brown horse, and that the girl's stock saddle was on a good-looking black. The girl followed his gaze eagerly, and when a frown crossed his face she clearly showed her disappointment.

"You're plumb welcome to use Brownie till you git another horse. Then you can turn him loose, an' he'll come home himself," she offered.

Naturally, he wondered why the girl had done as she had. Under the circumstances he could not very well ask her to explain. More than likely, he thought, she was ashamed of the things her father and brothers had done, and was seeking in this way to make amends. It was not a matter that could be discussed freely with her, and yet he could not accept her help. It might cause complications for her; nor was he in the mood to accept help from an enemy, and the proffered horse belonged to Bim Hatcher. There was also a chance that it was a trap. If he could be caught on one of Hatcher's horses it would be sufficient for their purposes. One look at the girl's eager face caused him to dismiss this idea.

" You have my thanks," he said politely ; " but under the circumstances I can't accept the loan of your horse, and my saddle is of little use to me without a horse under it."

" You're a proud an' haughty kind of a cuss, ain't you ? " she asked, with a trace of dislike.

" Not in the least," he denied hastily. " Circumstances simply make it impossible for me to accept your horse."

For a moment she sat swinging her feet thoughtfully. " Are you goin' to stay in the Basin an' mix war medicine fer my pap an' Hunt ? " she inquired finally.

" I'm going to try to recover my horses," he affirmed.

" What was them horses like ? " she asked curiously.

There could be no harm in telling her, he felt, and there was a chance that her evident good intentions might result in the return of the horses. Forthwith he proceeded to describe them to her in minute detail.

"Say, mister, them must be a pair of real horses," she commented when he had finished his description.

"They are," he agreed.

"I don't blame you for bein' sore at losin' 'em—but my folks never took 'em."

"They don't show many signs of wanting to co-operate with me in getting them back." He grinned.

The girl flushed. In a range country to refuse help to nab a horse thief is equivalent to being one.

"All right," she said dryly, "I reckon you'll find the Hatchers can take care of themselves. What'll I do with your saddle?"

If there was not a sneer there was, at least, a challenge in the girl's tones. He was conscious that he had unkindly repulsed her offered friendship; yet he could not see how he could have avoided it. Neither could he let the challenge pass unanswered.

"If you'll be so kind as to take my saddle back to your home and care for it till I can call for it I'll be much obliged to you," he said.

A livelier flame came into the girl's black eyes. "I'll do that," she agreed. "An' if you come after it I'll say you've got nerve."

She leaped to her feet, threw the bridle reins across Banjo's neck, and vaulted into the saddle.

With a cluck to the brown horse bearing the stranger's saddle, she dashed away.

He watched her admiringly until she passed out of sight in the timber. Then he turned and strode up the ridge she had directed him to take, wondering more and more at the strange people who lived at Hatcher's Shebang.

Buried in thought, and oblivious of distance, he passed over the crest of the ridge, and was striding along through the timber on the other side, when he was startled by a rider who plunged out of the timber upon him—another girl.

If Lane Hatcher had been a little mannish this girl certainly was not. His eyes lighted up in pure appreciation of the beautiful picture she made astride a fat little sorrel. Her slate-coloured riding costume was decidedly becoming. A high-crowned, black sombrero was pulled well down over her eyes, but failed completely to conceal a mass of hair the glorious colour of the sun. Beneath it was a pair of fearless gray eyes, which were big and wide now as she rode out upon the foot-sore wanderer.

"Hallo, friend. Warm walking, isn't it?" she greeted.

He was not surprised at her hailing him. Conventions, he knew, seldom stand knee-high in a cow country.

"It certainly is—for a man that's not used to walking," he assured her, as he wiped the perspiration from his face.

"Where's your horse?" the girl asked wonderingly.

"I—I lost them."

"Oh! What kind of mavericks were they?"

"A flea-bitten gray and a brown. The gray weighs about ten-fifty, the brown about eleven hundred," he answered.

"Haven't see them," she said, with a pretty concentration of her eyebrows. "Where's you saddle?"

"It's at a place that I think is called Hatcher' Shebang."

"Oh!" she exclaimed again. "Did you stop at Hatcher's?"

"Not exactly. I stopped there last night, and they showed me the gate. I camped not far outside."

"And in the morning your horses were gone?" Her tone showed that she expected an affirmative answer.

He nodded. "They're funny people."

"Very," she agreed dryly.

They had been standing still, or rather, the man had. The girl's sorrel horse was dancing feverishly about in a circle around the man. Commanding her horse to be still—and getting only a small measure of obedience—she regarded the man critically.

"What are you doing in this country?" she asked bluntly. "Looking for work, on other business, or just riding the grub line?"

"First of all I'm looking for a ranch that's supposed to be somewhere ahead; then for my horses and, possibly, for a job," he replied.

"I see," she said doubtfully. "Cowpuncher, I take it—though you talk more like a school teacher."

"Cowpuncher is right," he said, with a laugh. "I never taught school a day in my life."

"I'm glad of that, for there's only one poor little summer school in Cache Basin, and I don't want you trying to beat me out of my job teaching it." She smiled.

"Don't—don't people run any cattle on this range? It looks like an ideal cow country to me."

"Very few people turn cattle on the open range—unless they herd them," she informed somewhat shortly.

"But why?" he insisted.

"It's the custom," she said crisply. Then, in a burst of confidence, she went on, "It isn't safe to do any other way. Do you know that it's forty miles to the nearest town, and a hundred to the county seat? As far as getting protection against lawlessness is concerned, you had as well be in China."

"I take it, then, that you think I stand a slim chance of getting back my horses?" he suggested.

She nodded.

"And I presume that this Bim Hatcher is the father of this lawlessness?" he queried.

"Well," she temporised, "nobody has been able to prove that he ever did a thing he hadn't ought to. He appears to have set the fashion of every man being a law unto himself, and the rest of us have to follow."

Joe's curiosity was now thoroughly aroused. Even if he had not lost his horses he would have been in no hurry to leave until he had found out something more about the peculiar people who lived in this isolated, mysterious basin where the echo of a wild past came near being an actuality.

"Can you tell me if I am on the right road to this ranch I am looking for, and whether I am likely to receive any more cordial treatment there than I did at Hatcher's Shebang?" he asked.

She laughed. "The only other ranch in the basin is only about a mile farther on, and you'll be treated right—I'll see to that."

"You live there?"

"Yes. My dad owns it. His name is Bill Woodlaw, and mine is Floss."

The man on the ground bowed smilingly, but before he could give his own name she was talking on.

"Say, if you're a puncher I imagine dad can give you a job, and furnish you with horses for you to look around with, if you really think you stand a chance of getting your horses back," she stated.

"I'm a puncher—if I'm anything," he declared, leaving her to take it for granted that he would accept an offer from her father.

"All right," she said. "Climb on."

"What?" he asked.

"I said climb on. It's over a mile to our house and those boots of yours are liable to raise some blisters." She wheeled her horse so that he was on

the left side of it, and slipped a little, pointed-toed boot out of the stirrup.

" You don't need to be afraid," she said. " Dandy won't buck. I broke him to ride double long ago, so my pupils could ride to school with me."

" I'm glad to hear that you have more than one pupil," he said, as he placed his left foot in the stirrup, swung gracefully on behind the saddle, and Dandy jogged along homeward.

They came quite suddenly to an open space in the timber where stood the typical buildings of a cattle ranch. The man slid to the ground, and opened a gate for the girl to ride through ; then walked by her side to the corrals. At the gate to the horse corral they met a man coming out ; a big man with a slackly hanging moustache, but a jovial expression. Joe's first, fleeting impression was that the slack moustache covered a cruel, deceitful mouth, and that his eyes were too close together, and the nose too wide and blunt at the end. But this unfavourable impression vanished as soon as the jovial big man spoke.

" What are you draggin' in now, daughter ? " he boomed in a deep, resonant voice.

" Something I picked up on the range, dad. D'y'e reckon it's a maverick ? Do you suppose you could put our brand on it, and stake it to a horse and saddle ? " she asked, gazing down on the puncher, her big eyes dancing behind narrowed lids.

" Reckon I might if he's on the level," Bill Woodlaw said. " But how come he to be afoot ? "

"Come here, dad." The girl beckoned to her father as she swung off her horse. They walked away a little distance, and spoke together in low tones. In a few minutes they came back to the stranger. Woodlaw's face expressed grave concern.

"Stranger, I'm afraid your chances of ever gittin' your horses back are mighty slim," he said sadly. "But if you want to stay an' work for me you can have what chance there is. I'll pay you forty dollars a month, an' stake you to a good string o' horses. There's only one thing I ask—I won't have no crooks workin' for me. If there's anything on earth I hate it's a man who goes under an assumed name. What's yours?"

The stranger gave an involuntary start at Woodlaw's vehement last statement.

"There has been some very rough characters in this country," the girl put in.

His eyes rested upon her. "My name," he said, "is Joe Ormond."

It was not the name he had at first intended to utter.

CHAPTER III

THE HATCHERS AT BAY

ORMOND was invited to rest in the bunkhouse until dinner time, and as his protests were overruled by Woodlaw who saddled a horse and rode away, there was nothing for him to do but make the best of it. He had not long to wait, for Woodlaw was back within the hour, and shortly after invited him in to dinner.

He learned that the only member of the Woodlaw family he had not met was Mrs. Woodlaw, a delicate, colourless little woman whose ordinary tone was a whine. The meal was served by a cat-footed Chinaman, and Woodlaw explained that all his hired men were away for the day.

The talk at the table consisted, for the most part, of good-natured banter between father and daughter, with Mrs. Woodlaw throwing in an occasional reprobating word. Ormond's obvious wish to keep silent was respected, and he took advantage of it to study the girl's rapidly changing expression.

After dinner Woodlaw shoved back his chair, and heaved himself to his feet. "Well, Joe, le's go out to the bunkhouse an' have a little smoke—tobacco makes the missus sick."

Ormond's status as a hired man was established

by the use of his given name. Surnames do not long stay in use in a range country, and Mr. is even shorter lived.

In the bunkhouse Woodlaw shed the light mood he had assumed with his daughter, and became strictly business. First, he demanded the particulars of his new man's run-in with the Hatchers, and he manifested the keenest interest in the affair up to, and including the fight.

Ormond held nothing back except the part Lane Hatcher had played after the trouble in bringing him his saddle, and offering him a horse. He could see no good reason for mentioning that part of it, and Woodlaw saved his having to make troublesome explanations by asking a simple question.

"Where's your saddle?"

"Hatchers have it," Joe replied.

"You mean to say that you had a gun fight with Bim an' Hunt Hatcher, marked 'em both, an' never got a scratch?" Woodlaw demanded incredulously.

"That's the way it happened to end, owing to the interference of the girl; but had it gone on they'd have got me in the end. The other two brothers were coming up," Joe explained modestly.

"Possibly so," Woodlaw agreed; "but the fact remains that you must have the edge on 'em as a gun-fighter. I don't mind tellin' you confidential that if I had that much edge I'd be a rich man now."

"I don't understand," Ormond said.

"If you know the cattle business at all you know

that this is an ideal range—especially in the summer time. But you saw damn few cattle on it. Because why? Because nobody dares to turn their stuff out. There's no law can help us—we've tried it. We simply can't protect our stuff from old Bim Hatcher an' his boys. They're better, faster gunmen than we are, 'specially the old man an' Hunt. We've simply got to keep our stuff under fence."

"And can't you get proof that these Hatchers are rustling your stock?" Ormond queried.

"I tell you, man, everybody in here is afraid of that bunch. That's why I welcome a man who can hold his own with 'em. I've been lookin' for a man like you for years. Your wages are h'isted up right now to fifty a month," Woodlaw said, with great earnestness.

"Thanks."

"An' if you do all I expect you to do there'll be a big bonus besides," Woodlaw suggested.

Ormond sprang to his feet. "Let's get this straight," he said. "Are you hiring me with the understanding that I'm to go gunning for the Hatchers?"

Bill Woodlaw sized his man up carefully before answering.

"Cattlemen have to do things, sometimes, they don't like to do. I can't say I'd be much sorry if you happened to remove one of the Hatchers—in a just fight. But I'm not hirin' you to do murder. All I want is protection. I may want to turn my cattle out on the free range here, an' if I do I want

you to see that they don't git drove off," Woodlaw explained.

"Then perhaps we can do business," Joe said, relaxing. "But I'm not a hired gunman nor assassin. I'll start trouble with no man. If it's forced on me that's different."

"You're the kind of man I'd like to be—if I was fast enough on the trigger," Woodlaw said heartily. "You see," he went on, "I haven't got many cattle; partly because I can't use the free range, and partly because the winters are so long an' cold that I can't raise hay for more. But if I dared use this free range that I've got a perfect right to, an' had some capital I'd git rich. I could make it big without the capital if I just dared to use the range."

Woodlaw stopped while he studied Joe's countenance to make sure that he was getting strict attention. Then he continued: "Down in the valleys below here is thousands of cattle without range enough. If I had the money I could go down there in the spring an' buy 'em, bring 'em up here an' fatten 'em, an' sell 'em in the fall for big, quick money. But even without the money to buy 'em I can git 'em to run for a good figure per month—practically clear velvet—if it wasn't for the Hatchers. You see, we don't need many men to handle 'em in here, for there's only two places they can git out of the basin, an' a couple o' drift fences across them gaps would make it air-tight."

Ormond was a good business man as well as a first-class cowpuncher, and he was quick to see the logic in Woodlaw's plans. Certainly it was a good proposition, if the range could be utilised—and it seemed entirely too preposterous that a whole range could be terrorised and cowed by one family. He could not find it within himself to fear them, though he recognised that they were undeniably dangerous.

He felt, tentatively, of the money belt worn next to his skin. There was slightly more than twenty thousand dollars there. He felt sure that if he showed that money and offered to go in partnership with Woodlaw the man would jump at it. That much ready cash, used as the basis for additional credit, would insure enough cattle to utilise all the vacant range in Cache Basin.

But there was also something else to be considered beside the financial question. The ups and downs of a venturesome life had taught Ormond to submerge his personal feelings, and look the cold facts of life squarely in the face. And he knew that the thing which really threatened to bring his money out of the belt was not the promise of cash returns—it was Floss Woodlaw.

He was tired of wandering, and now there was little probability that any one who had ever known him would find him in this remote locality. As Joseph Ormond he could settle down there, honoured and respected. And with that name, and a partnership with Bill Woodlaw, there was no reason why he should not make a man's fight for the girl.

"Me an' my foreman, Sam Brice, are goin' below to-morrow to see what the chances are of leasin' some cattle for the rest o' the summer. If you show the right stuff mebbe we'll enlarge our plans after while," Woodlaw stated.

His remark was ill-timed. Had he waited another minute Ormond would have offered to buy in, but after this statement he felt that he could afford to wait a while until he saw how things were going to turn out.

"I'll take the job, and do the best I can for you," he promised. "I don't fear the Hatchers, and unless I get my horses back there will be little love between us; but just so I'll know all the ropes will you tell me something about these Hatchers—their history, I mean?"

Woodlaw knitted his brow in thought, and pulled the big, slack moustache until it was corner-wise of his face.

"There's little about 'em to tell," he began deliberately. "Old Bim Hatcher was the first honest-to-God settler ever in here; though I come in right after he claimed to be located here permanent. Years ago when the Bunton gang o' road agents used to operate all through these mountains they had various places to hide out in an' store their stuff. They called them places 'Shebangs,' an' Hatcher's place was one of 'em. Not that Bim owned the place then, but it's a safe bet that he was one o' the gang. It happened that when the vigilantes cleaned up the gang they never heard o'

this place because it was so far out o' the beaten trail, an' Bim was a member o' the gang they plumb overlooked. He may have been a new member o' the gang or he may not ; but, anyway, he slipped through.

"I'm guessin' some o' this, you understand," Woodlaw qualified. "You see, no man livin' knows the whole truth about the gang less'n it is Bim Hatcher hisself."

"I see," Ormond said. This corroborated Benny Vest.

"Later on, it appears, Bim discovered that he was safe, and that this place here in Cache Basin had been overlooked, so he settled down an' commenced raisin' cattle, an' he's been at it ever since—in more ways than one, I reckon. There was some talk that he'd been a Bunton man, but no proof. It was that talk, however, which give his place the name o' 'Hatcher's Shebang.'"

"There's one thing more I'd like to ask," Ormond said. "Hatcher, you say, runs cattle. If he domineers the range the way you say he does, why is it that he don't turn them on the range instead of keeping them under fence like the rest of you ? "

"Because by keepin' 'em under fence he can keep people from ridin' among 'em an' findin' stolen cattle. You found out yourself, didn't you, how hard it is to git in there without 'em knowin' it ? You could hide a whole town in that wilderness of his, an' the people that lived in the town couldn't find their way out. An' when you consider that

everybody is scared of 'em you can see how it's to their advantage," he stated argumentatively.

"I see," Joe again stated doubtfully.

He gave his new employer another critical inspection. Woodlaw obviously had his faults, but he did not look nor act like a coward, in spite of his professed fear of his neighbours. Certainly the Hatchers must be formidable enemies to make such a man so abject. He remembered then that his saddle was at Hatcher's Shebang, and that he had been practically challenged to go after it. And he had been ordered to stay away on penalty of death. It looked like a first-class chance to get some real information about the Hatchers.

Bill Woodlaw seemed to read his thoughts. "About that saddle of yours—are you goin' after it?" he asked.

"I thought I'd call for it this afternoon, if you'll let me have a couple of horses and a saddle," Ormond said casually.

"You bet I will," Woodlaw said eagerly, starting for the corrals. "I'll let you ride old Daddy, an' to-morrow I'll fit you out with a regular string."

"If there is a to-morrow," Ormond contributed musingly.

By the time old Daddy was saddled and the extra horse caught, Floss had joined the men.

"Where are you going?" she asked, as Joe swung into the saddle.

"We're just goin' to look around," Woodlaw put in hastily.

"I don't see your horse," she reminded her father. "You're going to Hatcher's," she charged Ormond.

"As well now as later," he admitted laconically.

"You're not going to let him go alone, are you, dad?" she demanded.

"Why not? It's his quarrel, an' I've never made any bones about bein' plumb scared of the Hatchers," her father retorted.

"Then I'll go with him," the girl said sharply, starting for a stable where Dandy stood with his nose thrust out the door.

"Floss, you stay away from there," Woodlaw ordered sternly.

"No; you mustn't go," Joe contributed hastily. He did not in the least underestimate the danger he was running in going back. Undoubtedly plans for his reception had already been made, and it would be no place for a girl to be when the show opened—at least such a girl as Floss. Then, strangely enough, his thoughts flashed to another girl he had met—Lane Hatcher. She would not be in the least out of place there.

Floss, however, was not easily to be put off. She led Dandy outside and mounted him. Apparently she was not used to having her father assert his authority, but this time he was adamant.

Seizing her bridle reins he commanded roughly: "Git right down off of there."

"I certainly will wait a day or so if you are determined to go to-day," Ormond said mildly.

With a helpless, angry gesture, the girl flung herself from her horse. Ormond rode away on the instant, before she could have time to change her mind. His mind was far from tranquil as he retraced his steps to Hatcher's shebang. That Bim Hatcher meant exactly what he said when he ordered him to stay off his ranch he had little doubt. But he had accepted a challenge which he could not crawl out of with honour. As he approached the gate he had been so truculently shown out of, he unstrapped his rifle, and threw it across his saddle where he could get at it handily.

The minute he passed through the gate he left the road and kept to the shelter of the willows that lined the creek which ran through the shebang. Merely to settle with the Hatchers he would have left his horses, and gone in on foot. But he had to get his saddle or acknowledge defeat. To get that he had to have his horses close. He reached the old stockade fence in safety, and there he left his horses.

He found a place where he could slip through, and once inside he glanced around cautiously. He was in the stockyard, and between him and the main buildings were the stacks and stables. It was not a great distance, and after a moment's thought he laid aside his rifle. He had six bullets in his six-shooter, and he knew how to place them quickly and accurately. Four of them would be ample if he had anything like an even chance.

He walked swiftly to the stables, and he could hear the hum of voices on the other side. Listening

a moment he learned that there were at least three speakers. A moment's investigation told him that he could crawl through the hay window, go through the stable door and come on the men from behind. But in the same moment he thought of it he rejected it. If he was to gain a victory at all it must be a moral one as well. Gun in hand, he rounded the corner of the building, and came upon them face to face.

Old Bim Hatcher was on his knees repairing a mowing machine, George and Dave watching him, and handing him tools. Ormond noted with concern that Hunt, the most dangerous one, was not present; but it was not allowed to appear in his voice.

"Act mildly, gentlemen," he said in a low, even voice.

"What the——?" snarled Bim, springing to his feet.

The six-shooter revolved in his direction, but the cold eyes of the visitor never once left George and Dave. Bim stopped and glared helplessly. His two sons regarded him with anxious eyes. At a signal from him they were ready to start something—no matter how hopeless it might appear. But the old man was too wise in the ways of gunmen to start a battle. At the first hostile move he knew that this stranger would get into action. They might get him, but assuredly he would get two of them—possibly all three. But Bim saw another possible way out. Hunt was in the house, and he would be

out any minute. He glanced hurriedly toward the house to give Hunt a signal if he was in sight.

Ormond was watching for that very move, and it told him what he most wanted to know—the whereabouts of Hunt.

"Quiet," he snapped. Without volition of their own the three men came to attention.

"Now, listen," Ormond said, speaking rapidly and vehemently, but in a low voice that they could only just hear. "You established a dead-line against me, and I'm playing your game. Not for a minute am I going to let you get the drop on me. At the first move from one of you I'll start mowing you down—oldest ones first. I know Hunt is in the house. I want him out here just as bad as you do, but I'm going to see him first. If you do what I say there won't be trouble. All I want—this time—is my saddle."

They stood immovably, regarding him with stony glances, baleful and full of hate.

"Your attitudes are entirely too unnatural; too stiff," he said, and his lips curled into a smile. "Any one would know in a second that something was wrong by the looks of you. Try to relax. You, Mr. Hatcher, drop down on your knees again, and get to tinkering with that mower. Drop!" The last word came like the sting of a hornet, and was emphasised by a flourish of the six-shooter. Old Bim dropped like he had been shot.

"Pretend to help him," Ormond snapped at the other two men.

Their father, their commander, had failed them ; and they had never learned self-dependence as Hunt had done. They became awkwardly busy. But Joe was not yet done. Slowly he began backing away for some twenty-five feet until the corner of another log shack was between him and the house.

"Don't make any mistake about my being able to shoot at this distance," he warned softly ; "because it's a mistake that will be hard to remedy. Now I want you to call Hunt."

Old Bim glared up at his tormentor like a trapped animal. Words seemed to be trembling on his lips.

"Don't make that mistake," Ormond cautioned again. "If you say anything except, 'Hunt, come out here,' it'll be your last remark."

"Hunt, come out hyar !" old Bim roared in a voice that trembled with anger.

Ormond smiled. He imagined, correctly, that it was quite the usual tone for the impatient old man, and that Hunt would not guess the real situation. Yet his smile covered a lot of anxiety.

"Wha'd'ye want ?" came Hunt's surly tones almost at once.

"Repeat," Joe hissed.

"Come out hyar," Bim Hatcher repeated obediently, but less forcefully.

The alert man facing them noted the changed tone, and knew its significance. Bim had decided to trust to Hunt's natural keenness. Ormond saw old Bim cautiously gather his legs under him, and swing to a position where he could get at his guns

with the least amount of trouble ; but he dared not warn him further.

Ormond could hear Hunt coming, and it seemed to him that the strained attitudes of the others could not help but warn him, and he dared not risk another menace. Then, Hunt stepped out in full sight, and Ormond snapped, " Hands up ! "

The look of helpless amazement on Hunt's face was almost comical as his hands shot into the air.

" Ye damned, blind fool ; couldn't ye see what ye was a-walkin' into," his father snarled.

" Line up," Ormond commanded fiercely. There was yet another Hatcher who might interfere, but some way he had confidence that she would rather enjoy the situation if she knew of it. But it was too dangerous a business to prolong any longer than was necessary. His safety depended upon keeping them close together, and in keeping far enough away that by the slightest turn of the wrist he could shoot any one who happened to make a hostile move. For that reason he dared not get close enough to take their guns.

He had seen his saddle hanging just inside the stable door, and when he had them lined up side by side he slowly backed into the stable door, still keeping them covered with his gun, and got his saddle with his left hand.

" Follow me at precisely my speed," he ordered, as he began backing toward his borrowed horses, encumbered by the heavy stock saddle. And they came as though drawn by invisible wires. He

reached his horses, and for a moment dared to look up. There, gazing at him quizzically, was Floss Woodlaw.

" Give me that saddle," she said, springing from her horse. In a moment she had it cinched on the extra horse.

" You'll let us ride away in peace, won't you, Mr. Hatcher ? " she asked.

" He's won to-day, an' he kin go," old Bim said, the light of unwilling admiration in his eyes. " But don't either of ye dare cross my line ag'in."

" His word is good," Floss said to Ormond. Reluctantly he put up his gun, but the Hatchers made no hostile moves. In a minute more he and Floss rode away unmolested.

" You shouldn't have come," he said. " You don't know these people."

" One couldn't very well be raised in a country like this without knowing one's neighbours, even if there is a feud," she declared. As he was obviously expecting more she went on, " This enmity between our fathers has gone on ever since we can remember, but when we were kids, Lane, Hunt and I, were the best of friends. Closer, perhaps, because we had to steal our playtime together."

" And are you still friends ? " he asked quickly.

" I've tried to be friendly, but ever since I went away to school Lane has avoided me. When I go there, as I do sometimes in spite of her father, she always has a headache or something, though I know she never was sick a day in her life. And she

never comes near our old playgrounds on neutral territory," Floss explained regretfully.

"Does Hunt?" the question was fairly jerked out of him.

"Often," Floss replied, studying her companion closely from between narrowed eyelids. "Isn't it foolish for us to fight because our parents do?"

"Yes-s, perhaps it is," he acknowledged. "Unless," he hastened to qualify, "the younger generation has actually mixed up in the causes for the feud."

"You think, then, that Hunt is involved in his father's crimes, and that I should hate him accordingly?" she asked.

The puncher regarded her intently.

"I guess there is no reason why you should dislike Hunt," he admitted. Nevertheless he suddenly found himself cordially returning Hunt Hatcher's hatred.

CHAPTER IV

A MISJUDGED KISS

OTHER eyes besides those of Bim Hatcher and his boys watched Joe Ormond ride away from Hatcher's Shebang with Floss Woodlaw. From behind a crack in a green window shade in her little upstairs bedroom Lane Hatcher looked out with envious eyes and troubled face. The girl had seen him backing away with his saddle, and she was thrilled. Then Floss had ridden up and spoiled everything. Now Lane's face was white, and the coarse, green gingham house dress she wore accentuated her paleness and emphasised, correspondingly, the irregularity of her features.

Nor were her surroundings designed to bring out her best points. For years she had been the only woman at the Shebang, and her training in the usual feminine graces had been elemental in the extreme. Her few half-hearted efforts to beautify herself and her surroundings had been rudely vetoed by her father who had no time or money for such foolishness.

Even the furnishings of her bedroom were crude, and designed solely for utility. The bed itself was constructed of poles brought from a nearby hillside, and the table and two chairs were equally plain. Her clothes hung on nails driven promiscuously

around the walls, and the only other adornment on the walls were a few feebly drawn pictures which the girl had torn from her school readers.

Suddenly Lane sprang up and threw off the coarse house dress. A few minutes later she appeared at the corrals in her riding costume—the only clothes she owned which could do her wild unconventional type of beauty any justice. Her father and brothers were still talking, but she passed them by without a word. Hunt half-started to follow her, but she waved him back. She unbuckled her rope from the saddle and went into the horse corral where she roped her Banjo horse as skilfully as any cowboy could have done. Then she saddled and bridled him and mounting galloped off up the trail on which Ormond had come into the basin the evening before.

Just outside the gate where Ormond had first entered the ranch she turned sharply to the left, and urged her horse into a swift gallop across a trailless range. With the assurance of one who knew every step of the way she headed for the most remote part of the basin.

The sun had disappeared behind the rim of peaks on the western skyline when the girl turned into a well-beaten, dusty trail. This she followed for some distance until it turned abruptly around a bend and entered a small high-walled cove. Here she came suddenly upon a corral full of milk cows, placidly chewing their cuds. There were fifty or sixty of them in all, and in another adjacent, tighter corral

were about half as many calves. Above the corrals, beside a clear mountain spring was a long, low shed, and by the side of it a small cabin from which oozed a curl of smoke.

The girl bothered her eyes with none of this. She tied her horse, and walked swiftly toward the long, low building. For a moment she stood in the door and surveyed the interior. In the centre of the building were a series of tin vats, and each side was lined with rows of cheese presses, and the other impedimenta of a crude cheese factory. In the aisle between the vats and the presses stood a man stirring something into the warm milk which flowed into a vat through a pipe coming in from the milking corral. He was a singularly ugly man with a face of vast crags and chasms and the faded, many-times-washed blue denim overalls and jumper he wore did not add to his attractiveness. Yet when he turned to the girl his rugged face wore a look of such wholesome honesty that it was far from being unprepossessing. He came toward Lane with hands extended and a grin lighting up his homely face.

"Why, kid, what brings you here this time o' day?" he wanted to know.

Lane's face, which had been sombre on her way to the cheese factory, now became defensively pert.

"Just thought I'd ride over an' see if you couldn't lend a little aid an' comfort to the enemy," she remarked.

"Meanin' who?" he queried.

"Oh, just me."

"Gosh, the way you fly aroun' I wouldn't think you'd need any help," he said. He was slow of movement and slow of speech.

"It's just that I want somebody to cheer me up, Mark," she said, and just a hint of pathos trickled into her voice.

"Gosh, Lane, I'd be the tickledest cuss in the world if you'd just let me have a steady job o' cheerin' you up," he said softly.

"Now don't start makin' love to me," the girl shot out impatiently. "That ain't what I come for."

Mark Brown, the cheese-maker, gazed at the girl with honest, serious intent.

"I've been noticin'," he said slowly "that you're gittin' more discontented every day. You've got to have a change, an' the only way I see for you to git it is to marry one Mark Brown. He's——"

"I won't marry you," she jerked out defiantly.

"You're too ugly.

Mark Brown stroked his face reflectively while he gazed at the girl with a quizzical smile.

"Oh, why don't you hit me for sayin' a rotten thing like that, Mark," she said contritely. "I'm all on edge."

"I knew you was, Lane ; that's why I don't take no notice. We ain't been friends for the last three summers without me learnin' quite a lot about you. But just the same I'mbettin' that you wouldn't have made that crack if you hadn't seen

some good-lookin' man that reminded you of the contrast. Ain't that so?" he demanded shrewdly.

She leaned against one of the cheese presses, and her eyes dropped to a study of her boot toes while a rich colour came over her olive skin.

"I reckon there's no use to deny it," she confessed.

"Who is this feller that's been makin' love to you?" he persisted.

"Nobody has been makin' love to me," she flared. "I don't even know his name—an'an' Floss Woodlaw has got him plumb under her thumb."

Her disconsolate tone made Brown laugh, even though it was a stab into his very soul.

"Gosh, Floss Woodlaw can't hold a candle to you for looks. You can easy cut her out," he said consolingly.

"Like fun!" she denied bitterly. "Her with her fine clothes, an' her education!"

"Well, ain't yer dad got money enough to give you them things? Bill Woodlaw sent his gal off to school, an' buys her fine clothes. Why can't Bim Hatcher do the same thing?" he questioned.

She answered wearily, "You're just like the rest—you think dad's just rollin' in money, when the fact is he can't even afford to hire somebody to help me do the housework."

Mark had, of course, heard the ugly rumours that were circulated concerning the Hatchers, and it

was hard for him to believe in their poverty ; though he did believe that old Bim had succeeded in convincing Lane of the fact.

His disbelief showed in his face, for the girl went on argumentatively, " Dad won't run cattle on the range, an' he ain't got hay land to raise feed fer very many, so we don't have a very big bunch. An' it takes money to keep up all them fences an' pay expenses. Him an' the boys don't hardly make expenses."

" That's no sensible way to do. Why don't they change their ways, or else leave the country ? " Mark demanded.

Lane shifted position and regarded the honest face of the cheese-maker cautiously. Bred into her very nature was a distrust of all men, but no one could ever imagine Mark Brown betraying a confidence.

" I'm goin' to tell you a family secret, Mark—one that nobody else knows," she announced with characteristic bluntness. " Somewhere on our ranch is buried the money that the old Bunton gang accumulated. Father has tried for years to find it. It can't be give back now to the people it was took from, so we figure we got as good a right to it as anybody."

Mark Brown laughed aloud, and the girl flushed angrily.

" I know what you're thinkin'—that it's all a bluff because my dad was a member of the gang, an' would 'a' known where the money was if there

was any. But it's a lie. I wisht I hadn't told you nothin'," she stormed.

"I wasn't thinkin' o' that at all," he apologised. "I was just thinkin' what a fool he was to keep on huntin' after twenty-five years o' failure. Looks like he'd git discouraged."

"Instead of gettin' discouraged he gits more hopeful all the time. Naturally he figures there can't be but a few places left to look," declared the girl, somewhat mollified.

"But how does he know it ever was there?" Mark scoffed.

Again his bland countenance removed her quick suspicion.

"I can't tell you that, Mark; but dad knows."

"Mebbe he does," the cheese-maker conceded; "but huntin' fer dead men's gold is a mighty poor way of makin' a livin'."

"Oh, you're right enough about that part of it," Lane agreed readily.

What interested Mark more than any gold at the moment was the handsome stranger with whom Lane had become infatuated.

"Who is this feller that Floss Woodlaw has been smitten on?" he asked disinterestedly.

"I told you I didn't know his name," she returned, snapping an impatient finger.

"I know you did, but in this country names don't amount to a whoop. What's his business is what I want to know."

"I don't know," she said earnestly. Then,

because what she really wanted was a confidant, and because this simple man was the only one she could turn to, she told him all she knew about Ormond.

" You wait here until I git my horse an' I'll ride home with you," he told her. " Then we'll see what we can do to straighten this mess out."

Several hours later they approached the stockade around Hatcher's Shebang. A fitful, crafty moon cheated them of a glimpse of a man who sprinted desperately for the cover of the stockade fence not over fifty feet ahead of them, and who cowered in the treacherous shadows of the fence, while they passed within two rods of him.

" You don't think, then, that it 'ud be safe to keep them horses here in the basin ? " Mark was asking, as they came within earshot of the man.

" I'm dead sure of it," Lane replied earnestly. " I tell you that feller has got nerve, an' he'll stay right here till he gits 'em, or know the reason why. He'll cause a lot of trouble fer he thinks we've got 'em hid here on our place."

" Well," Mark said slowly, " I figured on goin' out to Stanley in a few days, but to please you I'll strike out first thing in the mornin'."

By this time they were well within the stockade and Ormond, the man hiding beside the fence, could hear no more. Neither did he dare to move for the couple had come to a halt in full view of him. Yet he believed that he had heard enough to explain many things. Who this other man was he had no

idea, but that he was implicated in the theft of his horses seemed absolutely certain. So, too, was Lane. He watched them anxiously, hoping that their impatient horses would bring them close enough for him to overhear more of their talk.

Could he have heard more, his mind would have been disabused of the wrong idea he had conceived, for Lane's next words were : " From what they say about them horses they'll have to be kept mighty close, for if anybody sees 'em they'll sure remember 'em. So you'll have to look mighty careful if you see 'em. But I'm dead sure they've been took out before this."

" Well, if they're still stickin' around Stanley, or if anybody there's seen 'em I'll sure bring 'em back so you can turn 'em over to that feller or bust a leg," Mark Brown promised.

" Lord, Mark, you've been good to me," the girl said contritely. " You've asked me to marry you, an' here I am askin' you to help another feller that I've fell in love with like a plumb fool—an' you step right in an' do it."

There were lots of things Mark Brown wanted to say, and that he felt ought to be said ; but his tongue was strangely dumb. There was a pathetic, honest look on his face as he looked helplessly at the girl. Seeing it, a swift rush of emotion came over the girl, and she whirled her horse sharply alongside Brown's, and, to Mark's infinite amazement, threw her arms around him and kissed him with bewildering intensity. Wheeling her horse she turned toward

the stables. A moment later Brown also rode away. As he passed through the gate his head was buried in the big coat he wore, and Ormond gained little idea of what he looked like.

The moment Mark Brown was out of sight Ormond prepared to follow the girl into the stable, determined to make her tell where his horses were. But again he was compelled to cower back in the shadows, as another man appeared on the scene. This man Ormond had no difficulty in identifying as Hunt Hatcher. He entered the stable where the girl was, and Joe took advantage of the fact that they were almost sure to talk a little before either came out, to make a break for the stable. It was a low building, and he had no difficulty in silently swinging up on the roof. Wind and rain and snow and frost had worked havoc with the dirt roof in the many years since it had been put on, and he found no difficulty in finding a place where it was gone altogether. He smiled with satisfaction. By pressing his ear to this hole he was able to hear what was being said below, and in the gloom there was little danger of his being discovered.

He was doomed to disappointment, however, in learning anything of value; though he did hear something that strengthened his suspicions against the Hatchers.

"Now, Hunt, you be careful a-sneakin' around the Woodlaws," he could hear Lane warning her brother. "The feller that lost them horses is still stayin' there, an' he ain't to be monkeyed with."

"I ain't a bit afraid of him," Hunt returned sullenly, leading his horse outside.

Lane followed him outside. "I don't see what you want to be hangin' around there for," she complained. "I'spose you're smitten on Floss Woodlaw, but she wouldn't look twice at you any more."

"You tend to yer own business, will ye?" Hunt snarled, swinging aboard his horse.

For just a moment Hunt's head was level with Ormond's face, and had he looked carefully at the roof he would have surely detected the man lying there. But he at once angrily dug his spurs into his horse and galloped away.

There was a chance that Lane would reach the house before Hunt was out of sight, so Ormond's plan of confronting her with what he had heard would miscarry. But the girl was not through with her chores. She slipped into a stackyard and carried a forkful of hay to her pony, and stuffed it into the manger. Then she stacked up her fork, and slipped outside again.

Joe Ormond's brain had been going at top speed as he tried to decide what he ought to do. That he was on the verge of recovering his horses he was sure, but what was he going to do next was another problem. He honestly liked Lane Hatcher, she had no doubt saved his life, and he didn't want to hurt her. Yet he felt little compassion for her family. What then, was he to do?

There was another element to add complexity. He had hired out to Bill Woodlaw for the express

purpose of defending his stock, and this very night Hunt Hatcher was sneaking around the Woodlaw ranch. It was his duty to catch him in his crookedness if possible, and to help make him pay the full penalty of the law. Regardless of the girl he knew that his war with the Hatchers must go on.

But this mysterious lover was another thing. Ormond was not an officer of the law, so he felt that if he could get his horses back he could afford to let the fellow go for the sake of the girl without any disloyalty to anybody. He remembered now that he had met a man that first night, just before he reached Hatcher's Shebang. Very likely Lane's lover was the man. He recollect ed how he had surprised the fellow admiring his horses. At any rate here was a chance for a compromise with the girl for information concerning the exact place where his horses were kept. He dropped to the ground not six feet from the girl just as she left the stackyard.

"Miss Hatcher," he called softly.

The girl pivoted on her heel with a swiftness which the man did not at all anticipate. There was a glint of something gray in her hand which he speedily recognised as a six-shooter—and it was pointed directly at his breast.

Very wisely he kept his own hands well above the waist-line. "You did that nicely, Miss Hatcher; you've got me dead to rights," he acknowledged admiringly.

"You—again," Lane exclaimed.

"I—again," he replied, starting forward.

"Stan' yer distance," she ordered sharply.
"What d'ye mean snoopin' around here in the dark?"

"To tell the truth, I'm still looking for my horses," he said steadily.

"If we'd stole 'em you don't think we'd be fools enough to leave 'em here, do you?" she asked scornfully.

"I figured that they were hid somewhere on your father's place, and that my best chance of locating them was to come right back here to-night. If they were to be taken away I figured it would be to-night."

"Where's your horse?" she asked bluntly. At the same time she lowered the gun—apparently without noticing it.

"Well hidden outside the fence. I came in on foot," he informed, knowing that she had referred to his borrowed horse.

"Well, your other horses ain't here."

"I've just satisfied myself on that point. I know that they are not here, and that they are to be taken out of Cache Basin in the morning."

"You do?" she demanded, advancing a step.

"You see, I happened to overhear some of your conversation with your friend who is to start out of the basin with them in the morning," he said quietly.

The gun was snapped back up against his heart, and only one finger of the girl trembled—the one that caressed the trigger.

"What else did you hear?" she demanded thickly.

Ormond did not underestimate his deadly peril. The wrong answer, he knew, would surely send a bullet into his heart. The Hatchers were not the kind to bluff. All he could do was answer truthfully. Evenly and distinctly he related just what he had heard, including the brief exchange of words between the girl and Hunt. When he finished the gun was pressing against his breast hard, and she was peering into his face.

"If I thought you was lyin' I'd kill you like a dog," she said. And she meant it.

"I'm not lying," he maintained steadily. "I came here to learn what I could regarding my horses, and I heard nothing else except that your brother and I are quite likely to clash before the night is over."

"Why didn't you step out an' confront him when he was here, 'stead of tellin' me what yore goin' to do to him?" she flared.

"I wasn't ready. I never pick a row with a man unless I have some real evidence against him," he said quietly.

He had adopted the right method with her. An expression of either fear or braggadocio would have increased her antagonism.

"You'd better let Hunt alone," she advised more mildly.

Already her quick mind was casting about to find just what significance he had attached to the

fragment of talk he had overheard between her and Mark Brown, and, as it dawned upon her that he thought he knew that they all knew about the theft of the horses, she began to get a grim sort of satisfaction out of it. Here promised to be a way to get some much desired revenge on him. She imagined that she was angry with him because he had been guilty of eavesdropping ; though the truth was her resentment sprang from the fact that he attracted her more than any man she had ever met ; that she had actually confessed it—though to another man—and that he apparently did not reciprocate her feelings in the least.

" I'll not bother Hunt in the least so long as he attends to his own business, but as I'm now working for Mr. Woodlaw I feel bound to inquire what business he has night-riding over there, and if I meet him I'm liable to ask for an explanation," Ormond said.

" If Hunt wants to call on Floss Woodlaw that's his business," Lane said coldly. At the same time she lowered her gun and shoved it into the holster.

For a moment he was nonplussed. He had not seriously considered that such was Hunt's object, but he could not dispute it. It seemed better to let the matter drop.

" You realise, of course, that I must have my horses—now that I practically know where they are," he said.

" How're you goin' to git 'em ? " she wanted to know.

"I'm going to try to get you to tell me where they are so that we can avoid all trouble," he said. "If you won't, I shall trail this man that you were with to-night till I get them. Not because they're the best of their kind so much as because they're my pals. I've knocked about a bit in my life, and Freckles and Pilot have been about the best friends I've ever had. If you've ever liked a horse like that you'll understand why I'll be willing to take 'em back and ask no questions."

"I guess I know how you feel—I'd hate to lose old Banjo, for instance," she said slowly.

"Well, now that you know how I feel, do you suppose you can help me?" He pressed his advantage.

There was a gleam of white teeth as the girl's piquant face broke into a grin.

"You'll promise not to prosecute that—that man that was with me?" she asked, with a mockery which he overlooked.

"I'll promise."

For a moment she stood thinking. Finally she said: "You say you heard him say he was goin' out o' the basin with 'em in the mornin'. Well, he is goin' out through Bunton's Pass. That's the only wagon road in here. He'll reach the pass about nine or ten o'clock. You can head him off there, an' if he's got your horses he'll give 'em to you."

"Without a—a fight?" he questioned.

"He's no gun fighter," she said scornfully. That was literally true, and one of the chief reasons

why poor Mark did not meet with her entire approbation.

"And you'll promise not to carry or send any word to him whatever until I can meet him?" Ormond insisted.

"On my word o' honour," she promised readily.

The arrangements were not the most satisfactory, he knew; yet he could see no way to make better ones—and he had a stalwart faith in the girl's word. Then, too, he would have the night to see what devilry Hunt Hatcher might be up to.

"You've made me feel a lot better than I have any time since I've been in here," he said heartily. "Do you know," he went on in a burst of confidence, "you're quite the most remarkable girl I ever met."

Lane's eyes widened, but with a hurried "good-night," he was gone.

"Lord, as if I didn't have trouble enough without fallin' in love with that feller," she murmured angrily. "Now I've busted up with Mark on account o' him; he thinks I'm in love with Mark because he saw me kiss him; an' he's chasin' around with Floss."

Ormond had scarcely reached his horse before Lane was on her own. In a few minutes she was on the cut-off to Woodlaw's which he, as yet, did not know about. Thus, by the time he reached the ranch, she had found Hunt.

CHAPTER V

SHADOWED !

FAINT streaks of daylight were appearing in the eastern sky when Joe Ormond turned old Daddy loose, and headed for the bunkhouse at Woodlaw's. He had ridden, watched and waited for some sign of Hunt Hatcher ever since parting with Lane the evening before ; but without result. He had gone to the ranch at once after leaving Lane, and satisfied himself that Hunt was not there. This convinced him that Hunt was up to some devilry, and so he had put in the greater part of the night trying to see what it was.

" What time do we have breakfast ? " he asked one of the men at the bunkhouse ; Cub Frazier by name.

" Most any time," Frazier replied ungraciously, stooping to lace up a shoe.

Ormond sized up his two fellow-workmen. They were rather surly specimens, and he decided that he did not care to have any more to do with them than was absolutely necessary. Woodlaw had explained to him that these men did ranch work, and that he was to ride. Consequently there was little necessity for mixing up with them to any

great extent. The foreman, Sam Brice, he had not yet seen.

While he waited for breakfast he tried to thresh out the reason for his failure to find Hunt Hatcher. He had heard Hunt say that he was going to Woodlaw's, and he was sure that he would have seen something of him unless he had been warned early in the evening. If this was the case it could have been by only one person—Lane Hatcher—though the thought was repugnant to him.

At any rate, he reflected, he would soon know whether the girl's word was good. If the man whom she had been with the evening before did not appear in Bunton's Pass with Freckles and Pilot it would be because the girl had broken her word, and carried him a warning.

The breakfast gong sounded, and the two ranch hands leaped up hurriedly.

"Just a minute," Ormond said. "I don't want to give you boys orders at all, but if you happen to be riding through the fields this morning it might pay you to see if you can find any stock missing. I have reasons to think somebody was riding here last night who had no business here."

The men exchanged grins, and Frazier answered airily.

"Watchin' stock ain't our job. Fact is, we probably couldn't tell if there was anything gone."

There was nothing strange about this. If the men were merely ranch hands they could not be required to know all the stock on the place, especially

as most of it seemed to be leased stuff. It was their manner of appearing to hold something back which was irritating.

"It seems to me I heard that you was goin' to see that nobody stole any stuff from here," Randall, the other man, snickered. "Tryin' to put your work off on to us the first thing?"

It seemed to Ormond that Bill Woodlaw had been a little previous in announcing the purpose of his employment, but he answered dryly, "All right. I know lots of fellows who are afraid they'll do a little bit more than they're paid for."

"Don't git fresh, feller," Randall blustered.

Ormond leisurely finished combing his hair, and walked toward the house, waiting outside the dining-room for Frazier and Randall to pass in ahead of him, which they did unceremoniously. The dining-room was a long, low room, sort of a lean-to against the main log building. A long table stood in the centre of the room with rows of plain, wooden chairs on either side, and the Chinese cook was stacking food and coffee on the table as the men came in. Frazier and Randall unceremoniously slouched down at the table and began feeding with great zest. Ormond stood, undecided what to do. Then an inside door was opened and Floss stepped into the room. In a loose, creamy morning-gown, open at the neck, she made a breath-taking picture. Joe felt his heart beating faster as he looked at her. She was also decidedly more awe-inspiring than she had been in her riding clothes.

"Good-morning," she said smilingly.

"Good-morning, Miss Woodlaw," he said, with a grave bow.

The two ranch hands looked up for a moment with bulging cheeks and eyes; then fell again upon the platters.

"You eatee blekfast now?" the bland-faced cook inquired. Quite obviously the girl's appearance at the breakfast table was unusual.

"I think so," she said. "Mother isn't feeling well this morning, and I don't like to eat alone."

"Where is your father?" Ormond inquired.

"He went out yesterday afternoon while we were at Hatcher's. He got word of a chance to buy some cheap cattle in the valleys below, so he and Sam Brice decided to ride to Stanley last night instead of waiting until to-day as he intended.

"You don't look as though you had rested very well last night," she remarked, as she sat down.

"No; I can't say that I did," he admitted.

"Reckon he didn't, seein' as how he didn't git in till 'bout an hour ago," Frazier guffawed.

"An' he come in inquirin' if there was any missin' stock," Randall put in maliciously. They were overlooking no chance to retaliate upon this man whom they fancied held himself above them.

"Did you find your horses?" Floss asked, ignoring the ranch hands, as she correctly guessed their motives.

"I'm getting close—I think," he hazarded.

The girl studied him rather closely as they break-

fasted. He was good-looking, not over effusive, and she knew him to be daring to the point of recklessness—all qualities to appeal to a girl of spirit. In reality, Floss was impressed by him in much the same way, and as forcefully as Lane Hatcher had been ; though her much better self-discipline prevented her acknowledging it—even to herself.

After the bare mention of the horses the talk was confined to inconsequential subjects. The presence of the two ranch hands acted as a damper upon free expression, and the men lingered purposely to hear what they had to say. At last Ormond rose to leave, and the girl accompanied him to the door. Instantly the two men scrambled to their feet and slouched outside where they made a great show of discussing the day's work.

" You'll try to get some rest now, won't you ? " Floss asked.

" No. I've got some riding to do this morning, and I think I stand a chance of getting my horses," he confided.

Her eyes opened with interest. " Do you know just where they are ? "

" Well, no ; but I think I know where they'll be."

" If you're not in too big a hurry I'd like to ride with you," she said suddenly.

He thought rapidly. If she went with him to intercept the man with his horses he would be obliged to tell her how he knew the man would be there, and that would implicate Lane. This he could not do. He felt that though the girl might have

been mixed up with the crookedness of her father, her lover, and her brothers, that she would be straight with half a chance. The more he had seen of Lane the more he wished to help her out of the rotten environment in which she was compelled to live.

Could he have been more far-sighted, he would have known that he was laying up trouble for himself. It is poor policy for any man to love one girl, and try to act as benefactor to another.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ride alone to-day," he faltered. "You see there might be trouble, and—and—"

"Did I look like I was afraid of trouble yesterday?" she asked reasonably.

"You certainly didn't," he admitted. "Still—"

"Oh, all right," she said a little shortly; "I won't insist on forcing myself upon you."

"I'd like to have you ride with me to-morrow," he said boldly. "I want to look over the place, and I'm afraid I won't get much co-operation from the men until your father gets back."

"Well, perhaps I can act as guide when you want me—until you can find some one better," was her somewhat unsatisfactory response, and he moved away toward the corrals.

Floss stood looking after the lithe form of the cowboy. Surely, she thought, he had not come all the way into this almost inaccessible mountain valley merely to look for a job. There was certainly something behind it all. What? Was it possible,

she wondered, that he was an officer of the law, who had come in for the express purpose of cleaning up Hatcher's Shebang ? There had been rumours for several years that such a move was inevitable on the part of the county officials. Or was he himself a fugitive from justice who had come there to hide out—if so he would not be the first of his class to do so ? Whatever had brought him there she recognised that he had aroused her interest as no other man had ever been able to do.

While she stood thinking Frazier came up to her, and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, " Me an' Randall have been thinkin' 'bout that feller ridin' all night, an' 'bout him not wantin' you to ride with 'im to-day. It don't look jus' right to us. If ye don't mind we ain't got nothin' pressin' to do this mornin', an' we'd sorter like to string along behind that feller an' see what he's up to."

There was a knowing leer on the fellow's face as he finished which the girl did not like. In fact, she had never cared particularly for any of her father's hired men ; but she wanted very much to know more about this educated cowboy.

" Very well," she agreed. " Report to me what you see."

It was eight o'clock by Ormond's watch when he found himself at the foot of Bunton's Pass. Like the notch on the other side of the basin it was extremely narrow ; not over a hundred yards wide at the beginning, and narrowing rapidly until at

the middle it was not more than thirty feet. The sides of the canyon were not nearly so high as those on the other side, but they were every bit as steep and inaccessible.

At the entrance to the pass he dismounted and made a careful search for tracks. Though clinging to his faith in Lane's integrity, he was not taking any chances on an ambush. The undisturbed condition of the dust in the road showed that no horses had passed that morning. The freshest tracks were at least fifteen hours old. Satisfied that he was ahead of his man, he rode on until he reached the middle of the pass. Here he found a jutting ledge of rock behind which he could conceal himself and his horse, and here he took his stand.

The hours rolled slowly away. Gradually, to his great reluctance, he begun to fear that Lane had wilfully misled him. Then, between ten and eleven o'clock he heard the rumbling of a wagon coming from Cache Basin. It had not occurred to him before that he was on the only wagon road leading into the basin, and it dawned upon him instantly that his presence behind the ledge of rock might easily be misconstrued. He looked for a place to conceal himself while the wagon went by, but the ledge afforded protection from only one direction. There being no help for it he settled himself to wait, and to make suitable explanations when the man came in sight.

The wagon rolled into sight with the four-horse team swinging along at a brisk walk, and the

ungainly, craggy-faced man on the seat handling his lines like an expert.

The wagon was piled high with something—Ormond could not tell what, because it was covered with a wagon sheet. At sight of a man emerging from behind the ledge of rock the driver sawed back on his lines, and yelled, "Whoa!"

"Morning, friend—dusty travelling," Ormond remarked.

"Yes, it *is* dusty," the driver said, the air of surprise beginning to clear from his face. "Gosh, I figured this was a hold-up."

"No; that's not my business—to-day." Ormond smiled.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt me much if it was, seein' as I ain't got but four dollars an' seventy cents," Mark Brown said, with a genial grin. "I reckon no hold-up would care to pack away this load o' cheese."

"Cheese? Have you got a dairy here in Cache Basin?" Ormond inquired.

"Yeh, I run a few cows up here in the summer an' make cheese," Mark said. Glancing at the other man's cowpuncher rig, he continued: "It ain't so romantic as some occupations, but a man can do right good at it, if he don't have no hard luck."

"I imagine he could. It looks like a good proposition," Ormond agreed. "Lots of mighty fine grass in here."

Mark Brown regarded this man with acute

interest. It had dawned upon him that very likely this was the man whom Lane had fallen so violently in love with. He intended to overlook no chance to learn what he could about him.

"Sure," he said, referring to the grass. "My name's Mark Brown. If ye ever happen around on the other side o' the basin, drop in."

Such frankness called for a return, and Ormond knew that he could not turn this man off as he had turned Benny Vest. Nor did he have any reason now for refusing his name.

"My name is Joe Ormond, and I'll sure make you a call if I happen around your way," he said.

"Was you waitin for somebody?" Mark inquired keenly.

"Yes; I was to meet a man here after a while," Ormond said smoothly.

Satisfied that he had learned all he could, and being unwilling to tell of his interest in anything that might concern Lane Hatcher, Mark prepared to drive on without mentioning the stolen horses.

"Well," he said, "if this ain't a hold-up, I reckon I'll be drivin' on. You know it's forty miles down to Dundee, so I'll have to be movin' if I git in before dark."

"That's right. Good luck to you," Ormond replied.

"Same to you," called Mark, as he cracked his whip and drove away.

"There goes the first likable man I've met since I hit Cache Basin, unless you count Benny Vest,"

Ormond soliloquised, as he gazed after the disappearing wagon. Not once had it occurred to him that this was the very man he was supposed to meet, and that Lane Hatcher had made him the victim of a practical joke—and incidentally kept her word.

He waited in the hot sun for another hour, but no other man came along. Conviction settled upon him that Lane had given her accomplice a warning. It hurt, for he had depended upon her—and he wanted his pets mightily. Yet he could feel little bitterness against the girl.

At last he mounted his horse and returned to the ranch. It was after noon, but he got a bite to eat from the Chinese cook. He looked around for Floss, but she did not appear, so after he had eaten he went to the bunkhouse and was soon asleep.

Half an hour later Floss slipped out to the corral to meet Frazier and Randall, who were riding up. She had been aware of all Ormond's movements since his return.

"Well, what did you see?" she demanded of the men.

"That feller's a puzzle," Frazier said. "We follered him through Bunton's Pass, but we couldn't git close enough to see the fellers he met there, though we could see their stock."

"What do you mean by their stock?" Floss asked breathlessly.

"Nothin' pertic'lar, 'cept that he met two more fellers who had a bunch o' cattle, an'—an' a couple

of horses that looked just like the two this feller claimed was rustled," Frazier lied glibly.

"Where did those cattle come from?" Floss asked.

"The tracks come from this ranch near's we could tell," Frazier lied deliberately. "Like we said we couldn't see much, but it's perfec'ly plain, ain't it? This feller comes in here with a stall 'bout losin' his horses. He hunts fer 'em at night, an' while he's doin' that his pals help him round up a bunch o' cattle. Then, while they're drivin' 'em out through the pass, he comes back here an' tried to send us off in another direction. Then he pulls out fer the pass to tell his pals the coast is clear, an' when to come again likely. Don't that seem reasonable?"

The girl's mind was in a whirl. She, of course, could not believe that the men were lying, and yet she could not believe they were telling the truth. She regretted bitterly that she had yielded to an impulse and allowed the men to follow Ormond.

"Well, don't say anything about it till I give you permission," she directed.

"I reckon we've put a crimp in that high-talkin' dude that'll settle him around here," Frazier gloated triumphantly, as he and his friend sought the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER VI

AN INTERRUPTED TÊTE-À-TÊTE

THOUGH he had been up all night, and sorely needed rest, Ormond found himself utterly unable to sleep. He was humiliated at the trick Lane Hatcher had played upon him, but there were other problems of even more importance pressing upon him. He had accepted employment as a sort of range defender, and if his success in recovering his own property was any criterion, he was going to have a lot of trouble making good. The Hatchers, he now believed, were a brainy, desperate, well-organised set of outlaws. To get the best of them was going to take ability of the highest order. Despite the difficulties he looked forward to the struggle with them with considerable zest.

He did not doubt now that Freckles and Pilot had been driven out of Cache Basin, and he realised that he must either leave Cache Basin at once, or give up making any personal effort to recover them. If he had known beforehand that he could not get them back immediately, he would not have accepted the job with Woodlaw, and so could have trailed his pets until he found them.

Or would he? He had long trained himself to

look facts in the face without quibbling, and he met this question squarely. The only truthful answer to that question was that he would have taken the job anyway—after he had met Floss Woodlaw.

There was still one chance, however, to recover his horses. He sprang up from his restless bunk, and found a sheet of paper and an envelope. Taking care that there was no one to see him writing, he pencilled a note which read :

Dundee, Aug. 10, 1898.

The Galt Cattle Detective Bureau,
Salt Lake City, Utah.

DEAR MR. GALT,—I know you will remember the two horses I had when I helped you trail that gang of rustlers in the Wasatch Mountains last summer—Freckles and Pilot. You will recall that you wanted to buy them, and I refused to sell—not because your offer was not high enough, but because they were real pals of mine. They've been stolen from me, and you can imagine how I feel. The enclosed thousand dollar bill is for you to put your best man on the job right away. What there is left of it above the legitimate expenses is to go as a reward to the man who can trace the changes of possession back to the man who stole them from me. All I can suggest is that the search start in Dundee or Stanley. I never wanted but one thing in my life as bad as I want those horses back.

Sincerely,

He paused with pencil between his teeth. To Galt he was not known as Joe Ormond. Yet he had taken that name now, and, of course, he must have a reply. He could not take a chance on having a letter come even to Dundee addressed to the name by which Galt knew him. If any acquaintance of the Woodlaws should learn of that other name his standing was gone.

Finally he signed, "Joe Arthur," and added a postscript :

"Circumstances compel me to go under the name of Joe Ormond at present. Please communicate with me under that name."

Then he loosened the money belt from his waist, and removing a one-thousand dollar bill from a roll of considerable proportions, folded it into the envelope with the letter.

The problem now was how to get it mailed. If he was going to familiarise himself with the range, and watch the Hatchers, he had no time to ride out forty or fifty miles to the town of Dundee. It occurred to him that there might be some other way to mail a letter, or to send one out. He took his letter and walked toward the house. Frazier and Randall were pretending to chop wood, but he had no intention of asking them for advice, or of entrusting his letter to their care. They gave him a supercilious, sidelong grin, but had nothing to say. Joe knocked on the kitchen door, and the bland-faced Chinese cook opened it.

"John, can you tell me where I can mail a letter?"

"Post office? You see Miss Floss—she fixee," the Chinaman assured him, waving a yellow hand toward an inside door.

Ormond walked toward the door as indicated, but stopped in front of it hesitantly, undecided whether to knock or go in unannounced.

"You go light in—evely thing all light," the cook directed, with another wave of the hand.

Still not quite confident, he turned the knob and walked into another room. To his astonishment he found himself in a little room about six by eight, with a small window on the opposite side, flanked by a dozen or so tiny pigeon holes. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, among piles of mail order catalogues and newspapers was—Floss Woodlaw.

At his entrance a rich colour spread over the girl's face, and she scrambled to a chair.

"Don't tread on the United States post office," she admonished.

"This makes me blink," he said. "I had no idea you had a post office here."

"We couldn't afford to go clear out to Dundee for our mail, so we got this office practically at our own expense, for the cancellation and the small pay for carrying the mail once a week doesn't amount to much. But it's handy for us and the other people in the Basin, and the trappers and prospectors who go through here a lot," she explained.

"I was wondering how I could get a letter mailed," he said casually.

"Drop it in the little wooden box," Floss directed.
"Father took the mail out with him, but I'm going to send Frazier to Dundee in the morning, and I'll lock your letter in a sack and send it in with him."

She did not volunteer the information that she was sending Frazier out expressly to report to her father what he had seen of Ormond's movements that morning—or what he claimed to have seen. It had taken a great mental struggle to decide upon this course of action, but she felt that her father should be informed.

Ormond dropped his letter in the place indicated and turned back to the girl. Once his letter was committed to the care of the government he had little fear that it would go astray.

"Are there many permanent residents in Cache Basin besides you folks and the Hatchers?" he asked.

"Three or four families down on the lake in the west end of the basin, summer settlers—dairymen. They bring their cows in here early in the spring and stay till late in the fall," she replied.

"I see," he said. He was beginning to get uncomfortable. There was a tension in the air which kept them from talking freely.

"I'm sorry you didn't find your horses," she said, giving him a peculiar look.

"So am I," he said, so sincerely that she found herself wondering. If the story the ranch hands had told was correct he must be a rustler, and a clever one at that. He must know at that moment exactly

where his horses were, yet he certainly made a fine show of disappointment.

"What is your next job going to be?" she demanded.

"Well, I've got to be earning the wages your father is paying me, so I reckon I'll begin by making a voyage of discovery about to-morrow morning," he declared.

"And you are going to give up looking for your horses?" she queried.

"Guess I'll have to," he said regretfully. "They've evidently been taken out of the basin, so if I keep after them I'll have to give up my job here—and I don't want to do that."

"Why are you so anxious to hold your job here?" she asked bluntly.

"Shall I tell you?" he asked, with a ring in his voice. He bent closer to her and gazed into her eyes.

"Why—I—I don't know. Really—" She avoided his gaze.

"It's on account of you, Floss," he said earnestly. "I loved you the first time I ever laid eyes on you. You're the only girl I ever met that I cared for in that way. I thought I loved my two horses, but where you're concerned they don't matter a thing." He reached out and took both of her hands.

A wave of colour swept over the girl's face. Her fingers seemed to tighten in his for a moment; then she jerked them away angrily, but he quickly reclaimed them.

"Wait. Listen, dear—" he began.

"Is there any mail fer me?" rasped a voice at the little window.

They sprang apart in confusion. Hunt Hatcher's dark, bitter face was framed in the little office window.

"Is there any mail fer me?" Hunt repeated.

Suddenly Floss laughed aloud.

"Why, Hunt, you never got a letter in your life," she said.

"I reckon I got a right to ask if I want to," Hunt retorted.

"Certainly," Floss agreed sweetly. She made a great show of looking through the pigeon holes. "There's nothing, Mr. Hatcher—not a thing," she assured him.

Still Hunt hesitated at the window.

"Is there something else, Mr. Hatcher?" Floss asked, her eyes beginning to narrow mischievously.

"There is," Hunt jerked out. "I wanna private talk with you right now."

"All right, Hunt," Floss consented, much to Ormond's surprise.

"You'll excuse us, won't you, Mr. Ormond?"

"Certainly," Joe mumbled, backing through the door into the dining-room, and feeling as uncomfortable as he had ever felt in his life. But Floss had given him no excuse to stay.

Most of all he did not like the expression of something very like disdain with which the girl had received his abrupt declaration. Then, she had really seemed pleased at Hunt's interruption. Had

he only known what Frazier and Randall had told her, her attitude could have been accounted for easily.

" You mailee lettah ? " the cook asked, as he went out.

" You bet. Much obliged," he answered as he passed out.

The sun was yet an hour or two high, and the idea of passing the remainder of the day around the bunkhouse did not appeal. Like all cowpunchers, he could do his clearest thinking on the back of a horse, and as old Daddy was still in the stable, he decided to take a ride.

CHAPTER VII

FLOSS PONDERS A PROBLEM

"WELL, Hunt, what have you got to say?" Floss asked the man who stared through the little post office window.

"I've got a lot," Hunt snapped. "Too much to say in here. Come take a ride with me."

"All right," Floss consented readily. She locked up the little office, and fifteen minutes later she joined Hunt outside. She wore her riding costume, and Hunt's eyes lingered hungrily upon her while she brought out her horse and mounted it.

"Which way?" she asked.

"Anywhere—no; let's go down where we used to play when we was kids," Hunt suggested.

"I'd rather ride some other way," Floss said, and as she turned her horse in another direction from the way Hunt was headed, he had to follow her. Presently they passed off from Woodlaw's ranch, and turned into a dim trail that led nowhere in particular except to wind along a little timbered creek.

The moment they entered the timber, a man who had been squatting on a knoll overlooking the Woodlaw ranch house arose to his feet and hurried

into a gulch where his horse was concealed. A moment later he was mounted, and was guiding his horse in cat-footed pursuit of Floss and Hunt.

"Why, won't you ride over our old private trail no more?" Hunt asked sullenly, after they had ridden some distance in silence.

"I don't know—perhaps it's because I have business some other way," Floss replied somewhat flippantly.

"It ain't that," Hunt contradicted. "It's because you're always tryin' to dodge me."

"Well, why not?" she demanded flatly.

"Because I won't stan' fer it," Hunt declared hotly.

"You won't?" Floss asked, her eyes big and round, but without fear.

"No, I won't. You've been stuck up ever since you come back from that there school, an' now you're flirtin' with that there stranger," he charged.

"Well, Hunt, even if what you say is true, I have a right to do it if I want to, haven't I?" she asked, a trace of amusement in her voice.

"By God, no! You said you'd marry me, an' you've got to do it," he cried wildly.

Floss stopped her horse and laughed with genuine amusement.

"Why, Hunt," she said, "I never was engaged to you—never dreamed of such a thing since we were children. When we were about fifteen years

old we used to say we'd get married when we grew up, but that was only child dreams. You're not remembering those things seriously, are you?"

"I sure am," Hunt said grimly. "I always meant to marry you, an' I'm going to."

There was a timbre in his voice which gave her an uneasiness which she dared not show.

"Why, that's ridiculous, Hunt. I don't care for you that way at all," she argued soothingly.

He leaned over and seized her roughly by the arm.

"By God, you'll marry me or nobody. I ain't afraid of no man on earth. Don't make me desperate or you'll be sorry fer it."

His muscular fingers sank into her arm until the unwilling tears came into her eyes. She strove futilely to tear his grip loose, but the pain only increased. Abruptly she ceased to struggle, and faced him with a face that was white with scorn.

"Don't look so mad." He grinned. "I'm bein' plumb easy with you. Now, just to show what I could do if I wanted to—"

He reached his other arm around her, lifted her feet out of the stirrups and kissed her. Against his tremendous strength she was powerless. He released her quickly, and she dropped back into the saddle. But he was not yet done with her, and forethoughtfully seized her bridle reins.

She wiped her mouth frantically to erase the

loathsome kiss. He chuckled gleefully as he watched her.

"Ye see now, don't ye, that I'm not to be trifled with?" he gloated.

"Yes, I see it now—you coward," she said contemptuously.

His cheeks flamed.

"Still unconquered, huh?" he sneered.

"And I always will be," she retorted.

"No, you won't," he threatened. "Before the summer's over you'll crawl to me an' beg me to marry you. My dad's code ain't mine no more, so I'm goin' to see that you people come off yer high horse. I know how to humble you—an' I know how to take care o' that stranger." His voice was husky with rage, and Floss attempted to move her horse away before he made another outbreak; but he jerked her horse back savagely.

"You are very foolish, Hunt," she said quietly. "You can't do anything to hurt us, because our reputation is clean, and yours isn't. And I think you'll find that this stranger is able to take care of himself. Why won't you be sensible and leave this country? You say you are done with your father's code, so why don't you go some place where your evil reputation can't follow you, and try to live straight?"

A puzzled expression was on his face as he listened to her, which gradually cleared away as he comprehended her meaning. At last his mouth flopped open and he vented a huge guffaw.

" You mean to say that you really believe that bunk ? " he demanded.

" What bunk ? " she countered, her face reddening in spite of herself.

" That the Hatchers make their livin' rustlin' stock, fer instance ? "

" Why, of course."

He indulged in another loud fit of laughter. " Say, this is rich," he finally chuckled. " Say, when the storm busts you're goin' to flop right into my arms, an' flop hard—like this."

Before she realised it he had seized her in his arms again, and she was dragged half out of her saddle and pressed against his breast. She jerked one hand free for a moment and planted a small fist against his cheek with all the strength of her arm. His face now became a dull, brick red, except for a more crimson spot where the girl's fist had landed.

" I'll fix ye now, ye damn wild cat," he breathed furiously, seizing her arm and twisting it until she screamed with pain.

" Stop that ! " called a sharp voice suddenly.

Hunt Hatcher glanced up and saw Ormond two rods away, where the puncher had just ridden into the trail. Ormond's face was still a little blank from the surprise of coming on them so unexpectedly, and he was not just sure yet that an interference would be welcomed by the girl. Hunt was quick to see his advantage and take it. Holding the girl with one arm, the other dropped to his side like a

streak of lightning. The gun seemed fairly to leap to meet his hand, so swiftly was it in a position to use, and the girl's body was between him and his foe—making a perfect defence. Yet his speed made him miss.

Ormond's gun was in a position to use as quickly as was Hunt's ; yet good marksman as he was, he dared not fire while Floss was in Hatcher's arms. Instead, the instant he saw Hunt break for his gun, he rowelled old Daddy fiercely with the spurs, and the old bronco responded with a terrific, surprised leap that carried them ten feet closer to Hunt and the girl. But this of itself was not sufficient to make Hunt miss. It was a desperate jog of his elbow which Floss contrived to make which caused his bullet to miss his man's head by a scant inch. Had he held his fire a moment longer his enemy would have been at his mercy.

Before Hunt could take aim again most of his advantage was lost. He had the alternative of dropping Floss and fighting it out on even terms, or using both arms to hold her in front of him. He decided on the latter course ; not so much because he was afraid of the issue in a clean fight, as because it tickled his sardonic sense of humour to hold them both helpless. She was now entirely free from her own horse, and though she never ceased struggling to get out of the humiliating embrace, her movements only made it impossible for Ormond to risk a shot at her tormentor—exactly as Hunt had foreseen.

"Hunt, let me down, please," she begged.

"So that feller could take a shot at me, huh?" He grinned. "I know you jogged my elbow—which was darn lucky for him."

"Joe, put up that gun, so he'll let me go," she appealed to her would-be defender.

Having so recently seen a sample of Hunt's murderous disposition, and his prowess with a gun, Joe hesitated about granting her request, much as he sympathised with her unfortunate position.

"I'll let you go when this dude puts up his gun, an' rides out o' sight up the trail," Hunt stated commandingly.

"Please go," Floss beseeched. "I'm not afraid of Hunt."

Slowly, reluctantly, Ormond allowed his gun to slip into the holster. He knew that he was beaten, and he would resort to no excuses or threats in order to bolster up his dignity. Under the circumstances, to tell Hunt that he would settle with him at the first opportunity when there was not a girl between them would amount to mere vapouring. But Hunt's humiliation was nearer at hand than any of the three actors in the little drama had any idea.

The bushes by the side of the trail parted, and the lean, sour visage of old Bim Hatcher appeared. One gun in a steady hand was pointed directly at his youngest son, and another gun swung at his hip.

"Hunt, drap thet thar Woodlaw," old Bim rasped.

Hunt started, turned far enough to see his father—and obeyed.

"I've told ye thet no son o' mine could have ary truck with a Woodlaw," Bim Hatcher boomed. "I'd sooner shoot ye dead than to have ye hangin' around Bill Woodlaw's gal."

"Ye can't bulldoze me, ye ole——" Hunt began.

"Shet up," Bim roared, shaking his gun at his son. Hunt subsided sullenly.

"I suspected you was carryin' on with this here Woodlaw gal, which wuz the reason I follererd ye to-day. I watched ye go in thar from the top of a knoll, an' I let ye go because I thought ye mought be on a man's business. But I follererd ye when I seen ye ride outen thar with thet gal. It 'ud sarved ye damn well right if ye'd got shot."

Floss had landed on her feet on the ground, but she was in her saddle almost instantly. All her aplomb and poise came back to her at once, and she laughed at Hunt."

"Hunt just came to get his mail, Mr. Hatcher," she said maliciously.

"Mail!" Bim bellowed. "Ain't ary Hatcher had a letter fer forty year—an' if we did it wouldn't come to your dinky little office. I know what he come fur."

"Well, good-bye, folks," Floss said smilingly, wheeling her horse back up the trail.

Ormond was included in the dismissal, and he was quite glad of it. Now that there was no girl mixed up in the situation he had no particular fear

of the Hatchers, and was willing to settle the quarrel if they saw fit to revive it. Somewhat to his surprise, neither Hatcher showed the slightest inclination to renew it, except that Hunt favoured him with a threatening scowl. Old Bim simply seemed to ignore him.

"Come along with me, young man," old Bim ordered sternly. "I left my horse back yander in the bresh a ways. We'll git hit, an' go back where we belong."

With that menacing gun still covering him, there was nothing left for Hunt but to obey. A minute later Ormond was left alone in possession of the field—though, had he known it, Floss had stopped where she could watch developments without being seen until the Hatchers had departed. Then she spurred her horse into a gallop, and took the most direct route back to the house. She remembered that it might be possible to find out something about this stranger, who aroused in her such mixed emotions. She turned her horse loose without unsaddling, and ran into the house. Straight to the little post office she hurried. It was not her custom to examine the few letters that were left in her charge, but now she thought the circumstances justified it. Taking the letter out of the little box where Ormond had dropped it, she scanned it anxiously and carefully.

"The Galt Cattle Detective Bureau, Salt Lake City," she read.

A sigh of relief escaped her. If he was writing

to these people he could not be a rustler. From the first she had not believed that he was an ordinary cowboy, and her first guess had been that he was a detective. This letter, she felt, practically confirmed her theory. In the letter, doubtless, was a report to his employers of what he had accomplished. She would have given much for the privilege of reading it.

She could now afford to laugh at Frazier and Randall's story. Even if true, it was doubtless a part of his plan to disarm suspicion from his real business. This letter, for instance. The very fact that he seemed indifferent about letting it be known that he was writing to the Galt people argued that he had pretended to have his horses stolen so that people would assume that he was writing to the Detective Agency about their recovery. She fondly congratulated herself upon having solved a mystery. And she was even more delighted in another way —she was free to love this Joe Ormond if she chose.

Did she? Fingering the letter absently, she sat for a long time with a musing smile upon her face while she pondered the problem.

There was no return address on the envelope, and yielding to an impulse the girl seized a pen and wrote in the upper left-hand corner, "Return to Joe Ormond, Cache Basin."

She did not feel that she was taking any liberties in so doing. He had not known that there was a post office there or doubtless he would have written

it himself. She felt that he would thank her for her thoughtfulness, if he ever found it out.

Finally she sprang to her feet, and her usual, mischievous smile was upon her lips and in her eyes. Though she had now convinced herself that Ormond was as straight as a string, she proposed to have a little fun with him by acting as though she had accepted Frazier's version of his actions, until she forced him to tell her his real business.

CHAPTER VIII

A GIRL'S MISTAKE

THE following morning found Ormond in the saddle early. He felt now that his work for Woodlaw was just beginning, but until his employer returned from the valleys below he intended to spend his time in a systematic effort to get acquainted with the basin foot by foot.

He had not seen Floss since the encounter with Hunt Hatcher the evening before. He was not greatly surprised that she did not appear at the breakfast table, for a certain delicacy would prevent her thrusting herself into his company until the excitement incurred by the stirring events of the previous afternoon should have had time to subside.

He tried hard to concentrate upon the topography of the country he passed through, but found that thoughts of the girl kept recurring to his mind with such persistency that he frequently had to turn around and ride back to get a better idea of certain landmarks.

He could not get his mind off the way her face had lighted up when she first comprehended that he was trying to tell her he was in love with her, and then the look of doubt, almost of disdain which had immediately followed. He racked his

brain in vain for a reason. If she could have learned of his other name in any way it would have been easily comprehensible that she felt unlimited contempt for him. But he could not believe she could find that out.

Whether or not he would tell all the facts to Floss later was a problem that bothered him mightily. He rather thought that he would—that he must—but things had been coming too thick and fast for him to give that phase of the question much thought.

He settled into the saddle resolutely. Whatever came, whatever went, he knew that he loved Floss, and he was going to have her. He could not, however, escape the fact that the girl had some sort of understanding with Hunt Hatcher. He could not believe that she was in love with the evil-visaged young mountaineer, but unquestionably there was some understanding between them which did not exist between any other members of their warring families. One of the things he had to do, he knew, was to settle the issue with Hunt. He recognised that Hunt was fearless, and that he possessed surpassing skill with his guns. Sooner or later they were bound to clash, and there could be no compromise.

Noon found him on the shores of a small lake in the western end of the basin. Into it, he discovered, ran all the creeks in the basin. Like so many mountain lakes its outlet was through some subterranean channel.

There were three or four houses scattered along the lake, and at one of these, belonging to a man

named Clark, he had dinner. He learned from Clark that dairying was all any of them ever attempted in the basin.

To Clark he put the usual question: "Why don't you run range cattle in here? For the size of it this basin is the best cattle range I ever saw, and it's practically unused."

"It ain't safe, I reckon," Clark said deliberately. "If the men with money don't dare run cattle here, what chance would us poor devils stand?"

"But what's the danger?" Ormond persisted.

"Ain't you ever heard o' the Hatchers?" Clark demanded cryptically. "I've heard a little," Ormond admitted. "What about 'em?"

"Well-l, the fact is we don't have any trouble with 'em. Mebbe it's because we keep our stuff herded all the time, or mebbe it's because we're too small to monkey with. Anyway, as long's they don't pester us we try to keep our mouths shut," Clark stated.

"Then you don't see much of them?"

"Not much," said Clark. "Hunt comes around once in a while—and Lane. She comes here right often, an' seems to be a right nice girl—but mighty odd actin' an' queer. Nothin' like Floss Woodlaw, for instance."

"I don't know what we'd do if it wasn't for Floss Woodlaw," Mrs. Clark threw in. "She brings us our mail, an' runs errands an' everything for us. Then she teaches a summer school for us, an' goodness knows what our kids would do for a little

schoolin' without it, for we have to come in here so early in the spring, an' leave so late in the fall that they wouldn't learn nothin' if it wasn't for Floss."

"We think a heap of Floss," Clark agreed; "but I like that durned Lane Hatcher."

This was a good deal the way Ormond felt regarding the two girls. Despite his feelings toward Floss he had not forgotten his intention to exert a friendly influence over Lane to steer her into the path of honesty. He realised, though, that it was going to require the utmost delicacy to get her confidence.

He knew that he was doomed to have trouble with the Hatchers. The job he had accepted made that inevitable. But he wanted, if possible, to put them so obviously in the wrong that the innate fair play spirit of Lane would make her decide against the wrong.

This unknown lover of hers, however, was something else again. Ormond had tried to find out from the Clarks something about him by circuitous questioning, but they either did not know, or were afraid to give out any information. True enough they mentioned their neighbour, Mark Brown, but not in connection with Lane. If they knew of Mark's friendship for her they preferred not to discuss it.

In fact, Ormond was a victim of that worst form of deception—half-information. He had seen Lane kiss a stranger, but could not know the motives behind it. He had heard a few scraps of conversation about his horses which in reality had an entirely

different meaning than he had supposed. Of such gossamer threads are the webs of tragedy woven.

Mid-afternoon found him close to the Hatcher Shebang. He reached the place where he had first entered the field, pulled up his horse and gazed reflectively inside. He would have given much to know what lay behind those timbered slopes and gulches. Once a small bunch of cattle passed from one clump of timber to another, but too far away for him to detect either brands or ear-marks. He knew that sometime or other he would have to have a look inside that forbidden ranch, but now there was no reasonable excuse for trespassing ; nor was the time yet ripe for aggressive movements. He no longer had any hope that Freckles and Pilot were hidden there, and he had no reason to think that any of his employer's cattle could be there at this time.

He turned his horse away from the gate, and followed the fence-line for a mile or two, or until he neared the other gate into the Shebang. He had a hope that Lane might come home that way, and he decided to wait. He found a convenient clump of pines from which he could watch all approaches to the gate, and after an hour he was rewarded as Lane dashed into view on her Banjo horse, riding toward the ranch. He at once put spurs to his horse and headed her off.

Lane, of course, expected reproaches for the trick she had played in sending this man to head off Mark Brown, and her face at once became defiant.

Ormond stopped his horse and lifted his hat, waiting for the girl to speak. There was no chance for her to get by him, so she reluctantly pulled up her horse, and waited with lips sealed in a hard, straight line.

"Good-evening, Miss Hatcher."

"Good-evenin'." The words fairly popped out of her mouth in her surprise. She attempted to ride around him.

"Just a moment, Miss Hatcher."

"Well, what d'ye want o' me now?"

"Would you mind telling me, please, why the man who had my horses failed to appear in Bunton's Pass where you said he would?"

She had all along fully intended to tell him that Mark Brown was the man, and that he had met him, then laugh at his bewilderment, and tell him what a fool he had been. But his unlooked for courtesy had disarmed her.

"I don't know a thing about it. He said he was goin' out is all I know," she said, with flaming face.

"Listen, Lane; please," he implored. "Let's not quarrel. Even if I thought you had double-crossed me, I couldn't blame you—much. You'd only be playing the game as you see it."

"Then don't tell me how ignorant I am—I know it," she flared.

"You're certainly not ignorant," he denied hastily. "The only trouble with you is that you're far too nice a girl to have to live in your surroundings."

" You think that—that I'm—nice ? " she asked wonderingly.

" Why, girl, I liked you the first time I ever saw you." He had a splendid voice, and into it he put all the force and sincerity he possessed in an effort to win her over. It was no wonder that she misunderstood. Her lips parted wonderingly, and her breast heaved in agitation.

" You mean—you really mean—that you like—me ? " she asked softly.

In his philanthropic intent he was still blind.

" I do, Lane," he said fervently. " And if you'll meet my expectations, I'll think a great deal more of you."

" What do you want me to do ? " she asked breathlessly. If this man really cared for her, she was ready to give herself to him unreservedly with all the vigour of her untamed nature.

" I want you to be strictly honest," he said urgently. " I don't ask you to tell me one thing about what has happened in the past. But in the future I want you to have absolutely nothing to do with any crookedness that may be going on around you. Will you promise me that ? "

" Yes, I'll promise that," she said readily.

" Good. That takes an awful weight off my mind," he said with relief. " But it's going to be a hard struggle for you. In fact, I'd like to have you leave Cache Basin entirely for a while—go away to school."

Lane was painfully conscious of her rude speech,

but she was in no mood to resent allusions to her shortcomings. She could not blame this man, whom she had already idealised, for wanting his mate to have more education than she possessed.

"How can I go to school? I ain't got no money to go on," she objected.

"Your father, or brothers won't send you?" he asked.

"I should say not," she answered vehemently.

Here was a problem. He had succeeded beyond his expectations in arousing what he thought was her better self; but if he was going to help this girl at all he must do a thorough job. No half-way measures would suffice. With education her ideas of what was right and proper would inevitably change—and it would also simplify his own problem of catching her relatives and her lover in their law-breaking, without it reacting so hard against the girl. In his money belt was upward of twenty thousand dollars; why not, he thought, let this wild mountain girl have enough money as a loan, or a gift, to lift her out of her squalid surroundings?

"Listen, Lane. I'm no rich man," he began diffidently, "but I've got a little money, and I'd like to let you have enough to send you to school a year or two."

He did not realise that he was voicing her hungry longing of many years standing.

"You mean that you'll really do that fer me—no joshin'?" she asked anxiously, her black eyes aglow.

"I certainly will, Lane—with pleasure," he declared.

"I—I never thought you'd ever care enough fer me to do that," she said slowly.

Still he was dense. The tone of her voice ; the flash of her eye ; the heightened colour of her cheeks should have warned him. But remembering how he had seen another man kiss her a short time before, and intent upon his charitable intentions, he was blind to these dangerous signs.

"Why, of course I do," he declared.

"I don't know how to thank you, mister——" Suddenly a grin spread over her pert face. "Why, what d'ye know about that—me just on the point of tellin' a man how much I love him, an' never even knowin' what's his name."

Ormond straightened in his saddle with a spasmodic jerk.

"I reckon mebbe people's got engaged before this, though, when they didn't either one know the other's name, don't ye reckon?" she went on placidly.

"Engaged!" Ormond only just managed to clamp down on the word. What was the girl talking about? He cast back in his memory for words of his that could have caused such a horrible misunderstanding, and realised, too late, how definitely he had committed himself ; accepting the theory that the girl had construed his offer of friendship as meaning something else..

"I saw you kissing a man the other night," he offered helplessly.

This the girl interpreted as jealousy. She laughed.

"He's been tryin' to git engaged to me, but I turned him down because"—her voice became suddenly soft and low—"I was already in love with you. I told him so an', an' sort o' kissed him outa pity." She reined her horse close beside his, and her knee touched his with a gentle impact.

He barely repressed an exclamation that would have betrayed his chagrin. He sensed that one wrong word now would plunge her back into crime with multiplied bitterness. He looked down at her so close beside him, and repressed a shudder. Her mouth was turned invitingly upward, and her eyes were closed expectantly.

"Good God, what a mess!" he thought silently.

Then he bent and kissed her.

CHAPTER IX

ORMOND SHOWS SOME GUN SPEED

FOR three days Ormond diligently rode the range—going over the land enclosed by Woodlaw's fence until he knew it foot by foot. He appeared at the ranch house only at meal times, and then he was careful that Randall was present. Frazier had not yet returned from Dundee where he had gone with the mail, and to report to Bill Woodlaw. Ormond's one great object was to avoid a meeting alone with Floss until he could work out some sort of solution to the problem in which he had unwittingly become embroiled. Floss, he knew, would not have been normal if she had not expected him to ask for an answer to the question he was on the point of asking when interrupted by Hunt Hatcher.

It was a palpable impossibility for him to make love to Floss as long as Lane Hatcher thought herself engaged to him. On the other hand, to bluntly tell Lane that she had jumped at a false conclusion would be, as he had instantly realised, to hurl her farther back into the depths from which he was trying to save her. Lane simply could not accept the humiliation philosophically. All he could do for the present was try to avoid them both.

Mrs. Woodlaw, a slim, colourless woman, a semi-invalid, rarely appeared at the table with the hired men. But when she did she succeeded very nicely in letting them feel just how out of place they really were. She imagined herself a member of the aristocracy which she never had seen. In her presence Ormond was perfectly serene. She did not expect him to talk, and he acted his part well. But when only three of them were at the table the stiff-tongued Randall was a poor buffer, as Floss talked over and through him as if he were not there.

The girl was not at all sentimental—not in the least. Indeed, her remarks were confined solely to his movements each day. At first he thought nothing of it, accepting it as natural curiosity as to how he was doing his job ; but as her questions grew more and more pointed—so much so that even the stupid Randall grinned irritably—it dawned upon him that his own intentions were under suspicion. At first he was unable to understand it ; his own movements had been straightforward enough. Therefore, he decided, some one must be peddling falsehoods regarding him. He could think of but one man likely to talk to Floss who had a motive for wanting to injure his reputation—Hunt Hatcher. Yet he could not ask her point-blank what Hunt had been saying.

Gradually, however, he began to see a light. Every time they met, Floss was careful to ask him if he had heard from his horses yet. Finally, the question was asked in such obviously sheer derision

that it could mean but one thing. She did not believe that he had lost any horses. Some one, then, must have ascribed to him a false motive for having claimed to have had them stolen. All this pointed toward the Hatchers, with Hunt as their mouth-piece. It was not hard to put facts enough together to show that they must have intimated that he had claimed to lose his horses solely as an excuse to stay in the country, or to give a plausible explanation for his presence there. In some ways he was cutting quite close to the truth.

Forewarned was forearmed, he reflected grimly. But before the crisis could be reached he must deal with Lane Hatcher. One chance alone seemed to remain to him. Send her away at once to some boarding school, and let time and new associations cure her of her infatuation. At one time he had hesitated about spending so much money educating a comparative stranger; now he would have gladly spent several times that sum to be free of his unwelcome entanglement with her.

But sending her away to school also offered its difficulties. When he began to give the matter some serious thought he found that he knew of no such school, and so negotiations for a proper school for her would take time. Then there was the question of adequate clothing for her. His money could supply the clothes, but not the proper taste to select the correct ones. Above all else there loomed the difficulty of getting her out of the country. First, there was the avowed hostility of

her family to face, and second, the necessity of getting her away before she could tell the neighbourhood of her engagement.

On the third day Bill Woodlaw returned with a hundred head of cattle which he claimed to have picked up cheap in the valleys below. With him was his foreman, Sam Brice, and Frazier. Ormond happened to be riding near Bunton's Pass when they trailed in, and he stood to one side while the cattle filed by. With his well-trained eye, and sure cattle-man's instinct, he took in every detail, brands, ear-marks, and natural markings. But what interested him most of all was the condition of the cattle. Almost without exception they were big, strong stuff, well able to stand the rigours of a hard trail. Yet their flanks were gaunt, and their tongues were hanging out.

"Hallo, Ormond," Woodlaw called, as the riders drew up behind the panting cattle. "How's everything?"

"Fine. I'm just getting well acquainted with the range," Ormond replied. It seemed to him that Woodlaw was a trifle less cordial than he had been before, but this he attributed to saddle weariness.

"Had any trouble?" Woodlaw asked anxiously.

"No. Did you happen to see anything of my horses while you were away?" Joe asked. Almost automatically his eyes were still roving over the jaded cattle.

Woodlaw followed the puncher's gaze.

"Not a thing, I'm sorry to say," he said regretfully. "We done a lot of inquirin' around, but we couldn't hear a thing. That's why we had to drive these cussed cattle so hard to make up for lost time."

As they rode along behind the cattle Ormond began to ask questions concerning the price of the cattle, and both he and his employer rose in each other's estimation. Woodlaw sensed that his new man really knew the financial side of the business. And Ormond recognised that Woodlaw was an astute buyer to get the cattle at the price he claimed to have paid for them.

The cattle were turned into a pasture and let go, and the men scattered until supper time. At the evening meal Woodlaw was exceedingly jovial, going into great detail of the way he had beaten down some of the valley men in the price of their cattle.

"If Joe here can keep our stuff from bein' stole now we'll clean up big on this bunch," he asserted. "If I had some more capital I could sure do big things."

Again Ormond was tempted to offer to take a partnership, though, of course, the matter could not be discussed at the supper table.

"Dad, did you ever stop to think that it might not be the Hatchers entirely who steal our cattle?" Floss suddenly fired across the table at her father.

"Not the Hatchers?" Woodlaw asked wonderingly. "This basin ain't so populated that we can't tell who is honest an' who ain't."

"But don't you think that outside people could come in here and get away with cattle pretty easily because we are watching nobody but the Hatchers?" she asked pointedly, made more so by the fact that she looked straight at Joe Ormond.

"What are you driving at now, sis?" her father asked.

"Just speculating," she said innocently.

A frown creased Bill Woodlaw's brow. "There may be something in it at that," he remarked.

Ormond gazed across the table, straight into Floss's eyes.

"You are going to know definitely who the rustlers in Cache Basin are before the summer's out," he asserted firmly.

"And the information is going to come from you, I presume," she said in a tone that was almost jeering.

"Exactly so," he said calmly. He got away from the table as quickly as possible and went out to the corral, where he sat on a pole and thought and smoked until bed-time. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that he was accused of being a rustler. There was one way to disabuse their minds of that idea at once. That was to hand Woodlaw twenty thousand dollars for a partnership. A man with that much money to invest would not likely be a thief from himself.

Pride dictated, however, that he continue to pose as a penniless puncher until he could clear himself of the charges by pinning the guilt where it actually belonged. The way things were stacking up he knew that he must be moving against the Hatchers at once, but the other horn of the dilemma was that he could not move against them until Lane was out of the way. He decided to have a talk with Lane at the first opportunity. But he had forgotten for the moment that he was now a hired man and subject to orders.

The next morning Woodlaw's orders were to clean the fields of all cattle and turn them on the range immediately. As Woodlaw insisted on gathering them for a count it required the entire day. Ormond realised that it was good policy to turn outside, for the feed inside was practically gone without the addition of the latest bunch, and it was also good policy to make a count. Still, he chafed at the delay, for every moment that passed meant so much more danger that Lane Hatcher would tell somebody about her engagement.

Could he have known that while he was gathering cattle Lane and Floss were riding together, his peace of mind would have been totally destroyed.

At six o'clock the cattle were gathered at the gate where they were to be turned loose. Floss had arrived by this time, and while she, Ormond, Frazier, and Randall held the cattle, Woodlaw and Brice counted them through the gate. When the last cow was through, and the riders were all

gathered in the gate, Woodlaw addressed Ormond.

"They've put one over on you a'ready, Ormond," he said. "We've lost a bunch o' cattle since we left here."

"Impossible!" Joe exclaimed.

"It's the God's truth. Some of my best cattle too. It musta been several days ago, for that bunch we brought yesterday is all here."

"I can't understand it," Ormond said. "I have ridden every day where I would be sure to see cattle tracks if any had been driven out of the pastures."

"Then yer eyes ain't very good, fer I seen 'em plain goin' clean from here to Bunton's Pass, an' beyond when I went out," Frazier sneered.

"You did?" Ormond asked coldly.

"Yes, I did," Frazier reiterated, yet he quailed before the icy look which Ormond gave him. "Randall rode fur enough with me that he can bear me out."

Ormond knew that Frazier was lying, for if there had been tracks he would have seen them. Randall fumbled nervously at his saddle horn.

"Can you?" Ormond demanded of him.

"They—they might not have been cow tracks," Randall mumbled.

"I'm not saying that you haven't lost any cattle," Joe said, turning to Woodlaw. "But when these fellows say there were cattle tracks going toward Bunton's Pass the morning Frazier left, they lie."

"What's that?" Frazier snarled.

"I merely said that you were a liar," Ormond said calmly, yet he watched their every move like a hawk. Frazier's shifty eyes sought those of his friend, and a message seemed to pass between them. Ormond's hands were resting idly on the saddle horn. He carried only one gun, and it seemed to them that he should be an easy victim. Simultaneously the two ranch hands went for their guns. Ormond's gun was in his hand and ready to fire before either of his opponents had theirs out of the holster. Part of Ormond's skill with a forty-four was due to the fact that he believed that two guns divided a man's attention, and that it was better to concentrate upon getting one weapon out fast and attaining perfect marksmanship with it.

Now he purposely held his fire, in spite of the handicap of four guns against one, until both of Frazier's guns were out of his holsters. Then his trigger finger crooked twice, so fast that the reports were almost simultaneous, and Frazier found himself holding up two empty hands. One gun had been shot neatly out of his hand leaving him nothing but a stinging numbness in the member, but in the other he had not been so fortunate; the bullet had struck the barrel of his gun and glanced a trifle, giving him a badly lacerated thumb. At the first shot Randall had become paralysed. His guns were not yet clear, and as he saw his friend's last gun hurtling through the air his nerveless fingers relaxed. Ormond gave him one glance and disregarded him.

Somehow he felt that the very air was pregnant with danger, but he knew that it could not come from either Randall or Frazier.

He was conscious that Floss had spurred her horse between him and her father, practically cutting off his view of Woodlaw. Therefore, he turned swiftly to confront Sam Brice. The foreman had not moved. His hands were crossed on the pommel of his saddle, and there was a look of cynical amusement on his face.

"Well," Ormond challenged.

"That was right purty shootin'," Brice said coolly. "I've seen lots as good as that in the old days, but recent years I ain't knowed but one man could do better than that—though I've heard that Hunt Hatcher was about that fast."

"Put up your gun, Ormond," Bill Woodlaw said quietly. "You boys are all workin' for me, so don't forgit it again. Chances are you're all mistaken. Regardless of how clever you've been watchin' fer tracks, a bunch has been drove off. On the other hand, Frazier an' Randall couldn't tell a cow track from a coyote. All there is about it, them damn Hatchers has out-smarted us ag'in."

"I acknowledge that your theory is probably correct, and I apologise," Ormond said.

"I said I wasn't sure that them was cow tracks," Randall said humbly. Frazier remained sullenly silent.

"Come on, le's go home," Woodlaw ordered, leading the way with Brice. The defeated ranch

hands dropped in next, and Ormond found himself riding with Floss.

"Is it Frazier that's been tellin' you I'm a rustler?" he demanded.

"It is," she admitted. "But don't go off on that trail. They've been with us for ten years, an' dad has never once give 'em a chance to be crooked. They just don't like your language."

CHAPTER X

LANE PROPOSES MARRIAGE

As has been intimated, Floss had ridden and talked with Lane Hatcher while Woodlaw and his hired men were gathering the cattle preparatory to turning them on the open range in defiance of the Hatchers, or other rustlers.

The meeting between the two girls was purely accidental. Each was accustomed to take a long ride nearly every day, and their trails chanced to meet largely because Floss had chosen an entirely new route from the ones she usually took. It was true that Floss had tried for a long time to meet the other girl—and Lane had tried just as studiously to avoid the meeting.

As children they, with Hunt, had met and played on neutral ground in defiance of parental commands. Then Floss had gone away to school for a period of four years. Returning after the first winter away, she had found Lane wildly anxious to see her. They had not got along well. Then Floss had missed coming back to the basin for two years, and the next spring Lane had kept out of her way with as much craft as old Bim Hatcher himself could desire.

Looking back upon that first spring. Floss could now see how her schoolgirl conceit had been as gall

and wormwood to the girl to whom all schooling and the higher things of life were denied. Now she was anxious to re-establish a friendly footing and try to make amends. All summer she had failed to get more than a mere word of greeting on the rare occasions when she got within earshot of her former friend, but this time she determined to make Lane talk.

They rounded a curve between a creek and a ledge of rock where the trail was so narrow that when one horse was turned sideways another horse could not pass. The moment Floss saw Lane she deliberately turned her horse across the narrow trail, so that the other girl had either to stop or turn back.

"Why, hallo, Lane," she greeted smilingly. "Long time I no see you."

"Hallo." Lane wheeled Banjo sharply to turn back, making no effort not to appear rude.

"Wait, Lane, I want to talk to you," Floss urged. "If you turn around I'll ride along with you."

For a moment there was a look so savage on Lane's face that Floss's eyes involuntarily sought the gun that hung in business-like readiness on Lane's hip. The girl's brown, capable hand cuddled the butt meaningly.

Floss looked up, total lack of fear in her gaze. Slowly Lane's hand fell away from the gun, and a look of frank curiosity settled over her face.

"Awright—I don't care much where I ride—or ride with," she said rather ungraciously.

Floss turned her horse back, and led the way around the curve ; then they rode side by side.

"Lane, you shouldn't avoid me the way you've been doing," Floss said gently. "Where there are only two girls in a place it's foolish of them not to be friends. I've missed you," she concluded simply.

It was the right sort of appeal. In her heart Lane was dying for the friendship and confidence of another girl, but with the ruthlessness of a true Hatcher she refused to admit it even to herself.

"You have ? You've missed me ?" she asked almost incredulously.

"I certainly have. I've been lonesome for a girl friend," Floss admitted readily.

"I didn't think you'd care anything 'bout me after bein' off to school, an' learnin' so many things. An' you know how to dress better'n me an' everything."

Floss laughed at her, and tried to change the subject, but Lane would not have it so. In fact, so persistent was she asking questions about it that Floss quickly caught her drift.

"Are you thinking of going away to school, Lane ?" she asked with eager interest.

Colour flamed into Lane's face. "Yep ; I'm thinkin' of it," she admitted.

"Why, that's fine," Floss congratulated wholeheartedly. "I always hoped your father would change his mind."

"He ain't," Lane denied. Suddenly her great need for a confidant of her own sex conquered her

backwardness and her pride. "It's the man I'm goin' to marry who's goin' to send me to school," she blurted out.

"Why, that's finer still, dear. Let me congratulate you," Floss exclaimed. She had heard rumours of the growing intimacy between Lane and the cheese-maker, Mark Brown, from some of the dairying people on the lake, and it never occurred to her to doubt that this was the man, for Brown was notoriously generous and good-hearted. Also she realised that Lane had few opportunities to meet other eligible men. As for Lane, she did not mention her fiance's name for the very good reason that she did not know it!

Out of her experience Floss began giving the other girl valuable advice about going away to school; information which Lane absorbed greedily. In fact, she succeeded in winning Lane over completely. Just as they were about to part Floss thought to ask if Bim Hatcher would object to her going away.

"I'm 'fraid he will—that's what worries me most," Lane confessed.

"Then let me make a suggestion," Floss urged. "If your man thinks enough of you to pay for your schooling, why not be a sport and marry him before you go? Then your father's objections can't cut any ice."

"I don't know—you see he's never asked me to marry him before I go to school. It seems like he don't talk much about anything but school. Mebbe

he'd be ashamed to marry me before I learn a little bit about how to act."

From what she had seen and heard of Mark Brown, Floss was sure the cheese-maker was not the man to be ashamed of Lane. What seemed reasonable to her was that, out of the bigness of his heart, he was trying to let her see the world, and giving her a chance to decide on some one else. Floss believed that it would be hard for Lane to find a better man than that. The real danger was that in new associations Lane might forget her benefactor.

"It's because he don't want to influence you unduly," she asserted. "He wants to give you every chance. If you really love him you'll marry him before you go away, if you have to take the initiative yourself and ask him."

"I'll do it," Lane said, with a hint of desperation. "Oh, Floss," she cried suddenly, "you don't know how much this means to me, nor how much I appreciate your advice!"

The next day Lane met him. Though each had been eagerly looking for the other, it was not with the same sort of emotion. At sight of him Lane pressed ahead hurriedly. Ormond came slowly. This was the worst ordeal he had ever been called upon to face, but he knew that he must get it over with.

His greeting was rather commonplace and disappointing—to her. He contrived to keep his horse sideways to hers, and with the foot that was out of

sight he raked old Daddy unmercifully. With old Daddy acting so disreputably, loverly caresses were obviously out of the question.

"He won't be still; I reckon we'll have to keep moving and talk as we go along," he said. Quite skilfully he left the beaten trail, and led the way into a rough, broken country where it required most of a rider's attention to pick a trail for his horse. Old Daddy became tractable as soon as they were on the move.

"About you going away to school," he began rather awkwardly; "do you think you can get away all right without having trouble with your family?"

It provided the opening she was looking for.

"I'm afraid I can't. If I tell pap you're figgerin' on sendin' me to school he'll sure go on the war-path proper."

Ormond was heartily sick of his undertaking. He still wanted to help this girl, but he reflected grimly that it would be a cold day before he sought to become guardian angel to another.

"There seems to be just one way," he said slowly. "That's to keep perfectly silent about our intentions until we can write to some good school and make arrangements for them to take you in. Then I'll give you the money to pay your expenses, and help you slip out before your folks know what you are up to."

"There's another way," she said desperately, taking her courage in both hands. "Le's git married

right away, an' then we can let the Hatchers roar all they're a-mind to."

For a moment the whole world seemed to collapse as far as Ormond was concerned. To marry her was unthinkable. He knew only too well that there was only one woman in all the world for him—Floss Woodlaw. With a tremendous effort of will he steadied his voice.

"I couldn't permit that, Lane, at all," he said earnestly. "You've never met many men in your life, and you must have the chance to get out in the world, and see if you can find one you'll think more of than you do me. I want you to be free to control your own destiny after your education is completed."

"I know you're tryin' to be a good feller, but I'll never love another man like I do you. I want you to marry me now," she insisted.

He dropped his head so that she could not see him wince.

"I simply can't permit it," he said, with an air of finality. "We'll get you out all right somehow, and you can retain your freedom."

Her black eyes began to blaze as she inspected him narrowly. "If I do go away fer two or three years are ye sure that you'll wait fer me?"

To save himself he could not repress a groan. It was not part of his plan to stay strictly away from Floss Woodlaw after Lane was out of the basin—but that was just what Lane was sure to insist upon. There was a chance that once in school Lane would

soon forgot—and there was a chance that she wouldn't. This latter contingency had to be faced also.

" You're too dawggoned handsome, I'm afraid," she said with all seriousness.

He was sorely tempted to tell her the brutal truth, but a glance into her shining, hopeful eyes, so different from the bitterness and discontent he had seen there before, checked his tongue. It would be no less than soul murder to tell her now. There was no escape. The best he could hope for was to gain time. He must promise on his word of honour to wait for her, and if she chose to hold him to his bargain he must make good.

" If, when you have been to school three years, you still care enough for me to marry me, I'll be waiting at the schoolhouse door with a licence in my hand," he said manfully, striving hard to sound convincing.

Evidently he succeeded, for before he could think to rake old Daddy with the spurs, the girl swung her slim, lithe body far to one side and had her arms around his neck. He kissed her hastily and fairly pushed her back into the saddle.

" I know I can trust ye all right, but I think it 'ud be a heap better if we got spliced right now," she declared.

" No ; let's not consider it—it wouldn't be fair to you in the least," he demurred.

" It 'ud be the fairest thing you could do fer me," she argued. " There's a lot of things I don't know—

not havin' much education ; but, somehow, it don't seem just right fer me to be takin' that much money from a single man, even if he is engaged to me. Do you think it is ? "

" Look here," he said desperately, " there's a lot of things we've got to talk over before we make a definite decision. We ought to have a place appointed to meet. Considering the way things are, these hit or miss meetings are liable to be dangerous."

" I'm willin'," Lane said sweetly. " Don't you know I ain't hardly had a chance to git acquainted with ye yet ? "

Ormond crimsoned in embarrassment. Plainly this wild girl of the wilderness expected him to make good as a lover, and if he did not she was going to know why.

" Where can we meet ? " he asked doggedly.

" I know a dandy place inside our ranch," she replied. " You just foller our stake-an'-rider fence around to the south-east till you hit the mountains, an' there you'll find a blind gate. It looks just like the rest of the fence, but if you look close enough you'll find it's a separate panel, an' all you have to do is lay the rails down. You go through there an' turn right sharp to yer left an' go straight till you hit a creek. There you turn to yer right again an' foller up the creek till you come to a waterfall that's 'bout twenty feet high. Right behind the falls is a sort of a nook, an' nobody'll ever find us there. Think ye kin find it ? "

Her eyes were star-like as they dwelt upon him.

Instead of feeling like the philanthropist he had started out to be, he felt like a criminal.

"All right. I can find it easily, I think. I'll meet you there at five o'clock a week from to-day—if that's satisfactory," he proposed. He had postponed it a week to give himself time to think up new arguments, and had set the hour late in the day for an excuse to cut the meeting short. Lane, however, suspected no guile.

"All right," she said cheerfully. "I'll stick a white rag on that panel so's you won't have no trouble findin' it. All you'll have to be careful about is to see that pap an' the boys don't ketch ye before ye reach the falls. They're after yer scalp, ye know—though I reckon ye kin hold yer own even with them."

He nodded grimly. He was about fed up on the Hatcher tribe, and he would rather welcome a clash with the male members. Nevertheless, when he parted with Lane he screwed his courage up to the sticking point, and voluntarily gave her a kiss which left her reasonably well satisfied.

CHAPTER XI

A SENTIMENTAL FRAME-UP

THE following morning Lane Hatcher awoke in her dreary little bedroom with a feeling of uneasiness. She had been living with her head in the clouds for the past few days ; her starved soul in a sort of ecstasy. Now the inevitable reaction had set in, and she resolved more firmly than ever on marriage before accepting money for an education. She knew that when once her old father learned that she had gone away at the expense of a stranger, not her husband, he would start on a death hunt. His grim, implacable nature would not permit him to stop until the hunt was finished.

For a long time the girl lay on her bed fighting out her problem. When finally she arose it was with the determination not to accept a dollar from her lover until they were married, come what would. Then if he wanted her to go to school she would. She loved Ormond well enough that she would not send her fierce old father on his trail. True enough, she knew old Bim would storm if she married, but at the worst he would only wash his hands of them both, and order her away from the Shebang for ever. But to persuade Ormond was beyond her powers. She needed help, and in her perplexity she knew of only one to appeal to—Floss Woodlaw.

She dressed hurriedly and descending to the kitchen went about the routine work of cooking breakfast for her family. Not long after they had ridden away on their usual duties she saddled Banjo and rode rapidly toward the Woodlaw ranch. Arriving there she found that Floss had not yet had breakfast; but Floss had seen her arrive, and called to her to come into her bedroom.

It was the first time in years that Lane had been in her friend's bedroom. The many dainty little feminine trinkets scattered about in such vivid contrast to her own little bleak room sent a pang of envy through her. Even more keenly did she feel the difference between them.

Floss's smile of welcome was genuinely cordial.

"Chuck your hat away somewhere and sit down," she invited.

Lane threw her sombrero on the bed, sank down in a chair, and crossed her booted ankles nervously.

"I suppose you've come to tell me all about it," Floss suggested. "Have you talked turkey to your man yet?"

Lane coloured with embarrassment.

"I asked him to marry me, an' he wouldn't," she confessed.

Floss laughed. "You haven't had experience enough with men to know how to go about it."

"I'm afraid he won't marry me till I git more educated—an' I won't take his darned money unless he does marry me," Lane declared.

A slow smile began to spread over Floss's features, and her eyes began to narrow as they usually did when something appealed to her sense of humour.

"I believe I know a way to handle him," she said softly. "Let's see—when are you going to meet him again?"

"At five o'clock a week from yesterday," Lane answered.

"And where?"

"At a place inside our fence—behind a waterfall."

"Then everything ought to work out fine," Floss declared energetically. The match-making instinct latent in most women had taken possession of her, and besides she really wished to help Lane out of her difficulties. The plan which was rapidly forming in her mind promised to work out beautifully. If this reluctant lover should walk into their rendezvous and find the stage all set with bride, minister, licence, and witnesses, he could not very well refuse to go on with the ceremony.

Lane's eyes grew big and starry as she listened to Floss outline her plan. It was more daring than anything she would ever have thought of, and if it should fail the humiliation would be unbearable. But Floss argued that it could not possibly fail. Under the circumstances even the most ungallant of men would feel compelled to go through with it. Lane was easily convinced, and as she felt it was her only chance for happiness she assented to the plan.

After Lane had gone Floss changed into her riding togs. She hummed a happy little song as she did so. It was a real pleasure to be helping the other girl, and Floss felt that her own happiness was practically assured. True enough, Joe Ormond, as she knew him, had not reopened the subject of love as she had expected him to do, but the looks he occasionally gave her were so worried and pathetic that she laughed inwardly every time she thought about it.

That he did not speak she attributed to the fact that he knew he was under a certain amount of suspicion on account of Frazier's charges, and was unwilling to make love to her until he had cleared the matter up. She was more than ever convinced that he was a representative of the Galt Cattle Detective people, and was minded to acquaint her father with the fact. But as Woodlaw expressed to her his utmost confidence in Ormond's integrity, she decided to keep it to herself for the present.

As for Woodlaw, he was as good a judge of human nature as he was of cattle. With good-natured tolerance he had agreed with his daughter's estimate of the new man, and had ordered his other men to keep quiet about him in her presence. He had no intention of letting Ormond become too intimate with Floss, but he had the good judgment not to oppose the girl too openly.

Floss had dinner with the Clarks and after the meal a few coins changed hands. Clark had become an assistant marriage promoter.

CHAPTER XII

A BULLDOG ON THE TRAIL

BEHIND the ugly face of Mark Brown, the cheese-maker, was a keen brain ; behind his uncouth garb was a heart of gold. A man of silence, he had mixed little in society ; and the women he knew were few. Yet for Lane Hatcher he had formed a deep and abiding affection—so genuine that he could step aside gracefully for another man if it was to her interest. Perhaps it was equally the affection of the parent and the lover, for above all it was protective.

He had listened to her confession of love for another man with a good grace—even cheerfully. Had even promised to help recover this other man's horses, solely to humour the girl. Down in her heart Lane may have been a little disappointed because he gave up so easily. In reality Mark had not given up at all—he was just getting started.

The morning he had met Ormond in Bunton's Pass he had made sure that he was the man with whom Lane had become infatuated. He had sized him up critically, and a little unfavourably, as was only natural. A jealous man's verdict on a successful rival who is dark, handsome, and of unusual grace of speech and movement is almost sure to be un-

favourable. Yet he was fair enough to admit that for all he knew this man might be all right.

Arriving in Dundee, he disposed of his wagon load of cheese, and then began making inquiries. Though he asked a few casual questions concerning the two horses Ormond was said to have lost, most of his questioning was with regard to the man himself. But by midnight the cheese-maker knew positively that no one in Dundee knew anything of either the stranger or his horses. He hired a room and lay down, not to sleep, but to consider his problem.

He had really done all he had promised Lane he would do, but he was not satisfied. If this stranger with whom Lane was in love should prove to be all right, well and good. But he knew that somebody should find out. Impulsive Lane, he knew, would be pretty liable to let her feelings be known if she came in contact with this fellow, and if he was not the right sort he would certainly take some advantage of her. Knowing the Hatchers as he did, Mark knew that they would not take the trouble to investigate this man's past even when they learned Lane was in love with him. They would blow up and try to kill him, perhaps, but as far as acting for Lane's best interests was concerned, it would never enter their heads. There was no one else to look after her, so it left it strictly up to him.

It was going to be expensive to neglect his business, and he was by no means a rich man, though his little factory and herd of cows paid him very good wages. But the sacrifice had to be made, he

considered. The first thing in the morning he hired a man to drive his team back to Cache Basin, and assist his three hired boys to take care of the cows and make the cheese. Then he drew his available cash from the bank, hired a horse and saddle, and set out to investigate this man Ormond's past.

That night Mark found himself in another mountain town—Stanley. He knew that to get into Cache Basin the stranger would have had to come through either Stanley or Dundee. Dundee having been eliminated the night before, he felt confident that he would quickly get track of his man in Stanley.

But after making the rounds of all the saloons, stores, and livery stables in the place without meeting a man who had ever seen the man he described he began to have graver doubts. He continued his search diligently until the last saloon light was extinguished, and to make doubly sure he made the rounds again in the morning. But again he could not find a single man who had seen any one who remotely resembled the man he sought ; nor a man who had seen the kind of horses he described ; nor a man who had ever heard the name of Ormond.

Men with less determination and more ability than Mark Brown might have given up then and there what seemed a hopeless quest ; but Mark possessed the tenacity of a bulldog, and having started the job he was not going to give up until every resource was exhausted. The fact that the stranger had come

into the basin in the night, and had slipped by the towns without being seen certainly indicated that he was deliberately trying to keep his trail dim.

Satisfied at last that nothing could be learned by staying longer in Stanley, Mark saddled his hired horse and set out to make a ranch to ranch canvas of the lower valleys. He made inquiries at every ranch, and of every stranger he met. It was a slow, tedious business, but he held to it doggedly on the chance that his man must have stopped somewhere for supplies, or have been seen by some wandering cowpuncher.

At ranch after ranch he received the same negative reply, but such persistence could not for ever go unrewarded. Four days after leaving Dundee he stopped overnight at the 3C Ranch, and there he met Benny Vest.

"Sure I met the feller," talkative Benny admitted promptly. "He wuz ridin' a big, fine, flea-bitten gray he called Freckles what 'ud foller 'im aroun' like a dawg. An' he had another peach of a horse follerin' with a pack outfit—a dapple brown he called Pivot, or Pilate or somethin'."

"Do you remember the brands?" Mark asked. Lane had got the brands from Ormond, and she had given them to Mark.

"Sure I remember the bran's," Benny asserted aggrievedly. "I'd be one hell of a puncher, wouldn't I, if I didn't notice the bran's on the strange stock I meet—specially horses like them there was. The gray had a Lazy K on the right stifle, an' the brown

a Quarter-circle W on the left shoulder ; but both of 'em wore a D Bar on the right shoulder, which showed that they'd been sold to the same man onct though raised by sep'rate outfits. I tell you them was the best pair o' broncs I've clapped my eyes on in many a long day. D'ye know——?"

"Did you hear this feller say what he was doin' in this country ?" Mark asked eagerly, overjoyed that he had at last found a clue.

"That feller could say less about what his business was than any feller you ever saw," Benny grinned.

"Did you hear him say where he come from ?" Mark insisted.

Benny scratched his head to loosen the coils of memory. "He wuzn't a very talkative cuss as I remember, an' he talked enough, too. You just couldn't pin him down to nothin' solid as I remember. He looked like a real cowman, though he talked like a preacher, an' I tried to git him to come back with me an' Biglar an' take a job here after he said he wuz lookin' fer work, but he shied away from it. Lots of fellers shy away frum work, though. At that he mighta come, but we happened to tell him about Cache Basin an' Hatcher's Shebang up there in the mountains. It seemed he'd never heard o' the place an' was hell-bent to go an' see it. Didja ever run across him ?"

As usual Benny had become so tangled in his own verbosity that he had completely forgotten the question he had set out to answer.

"I wanted to know if he'd let anything drop about where he come from," Mark reminded.

"I wuz tryin' to think," Benny said placidly. "Say, are you an officer or somethin'?"

"I'm no officer," Mark denied. "Was he from the Salmon River country, fer instance?"

"No, I don't reckon he was. B'gosh, he did tell Biglar, too, that he'd been ridin' some'ers down in South-east Idaho. The range was—what was it, Biglar?"

"Damn'fie remember," Biglar replied.

"Seems to me it wuz some sort o' springs—was it Cub Springs?"

"Bear Springs," Biglar said laconically.

"That musta been it," Benny agreed. Thus by a queer association of ideas Mark Brown was sent in quest of a range that did not exist after he had found a trail that led to the one he wanted. Ormond had told Biglar that he had been riding on the Chub Springs Range. Benny had remembered it as Cub, and Biglar, sensing that that was wrong, had decided it must be Bear Springs.

"Was this man, when you seen him, keepin' to the main trail, or was he sort of sneakin' around?" Mark asked.

"I don't know's he was sneakin' along or not, but he was sure travellin' wide of any trail when he run into us," Benny said.

"I see," the cheese-maker said grimly. His face settled into firm, implacable lines. In his estimation if circumstantial evidence ever did point to a man

being an objectionable character, it pointed to this stranger who had so curiously and suddenly enthralled Lane Hatcher. Mark had no ability as a detective, but his gift of bulldog tenacity he proposed to exercise until he had back-tracked this man to where he was known, and where he could get his character straight.

Then, when he had told Lane the truth—whatever it was—she could do as she pleased about Ormond. All that Mark asked was all the cards on the table.

CHAPTER XIII

A MOMENT OF MADNESS

THAT the Hatchers would be quick to accept the challenge that had been implied when Bill Woodlaw turned his cattle on the open range for the first time in years, was Ormond's belief. Woodlaw himself seemed to concur in the opinion, but made little effort personally to protect his stock ; reiterating over and over with tiresome monotony his fear of the Hatchers' guns.

Brice had been sent away to see about buying more cattle, and as Frazier and Randall were kept busy about the ranch, the riding devolved upon Ormond alone. He would not have been averse to an immediate show-down with the Hatchers, except that he wanted time to get his affair with Lane straightened out, and get the girl away before the crash came if possible. He had not yet given up hope of persuading her to go away, but he knew that the issue was very much in doubt.

He planned his daily ride very carefully with a three-fold object. The first thing each morning was to ride to Bunton's Pass and turn back the new cattle which showed an inclination to drift back to their old ranges. After this he circled back between the cattle and Hatcher's stake-and-rider fence. He hoped to leave a wide strip as a sort of devil's lane

between the two ranches to prevent a possible collision, and to enable him to observe the tracks of cattle that might have been driven away. His third objective was to so ride as not to be an easy victim of an assassin's bullet. He put no great faith in old Bim Hatcher's assurance that he bothered no one off his own ranch, and, even if so, Hunt quite obviously did not subscribe to the doctrine. Since it was now quite obvious to him that Hunt was in love with Floss, he did not put it above that worthy to try to eliminate a possible rival, from the cover of a tree. He also had an idea that Frazier might not be above such tactics, and so he carefully studied every move before making it. The fag end of the day he rode among the cattle, or on the side of the basin opposite Hatcher's Shebang.

Already the new cattle had filled up and were looking well. Ormond was positively pained at seeing so much good grass going to waste, for he knew that Woodlaw could not buy enough cattle to begin to eat the surplus. The reflection that if it were not for the Hatchers he might already be in partnership with Woodlaw, and be getting some benefit from this excess range further embittered him. It was also very likely that he could make a better impression upon Floss than he had done, if she could know that he was something besides a penniless puncher. Certainly the fact that he had some money would not diminish his chances with her. Yet he could not be so bombastic as to mention his money merely to let it be known.

Despite the fact that his affair with Lane Hatcher threatened to terminate everything between himself and Floss, he continually found himself building air castles in which they two were the sole inhabitants. With a curse he would rouse himself from his reverie, and rack his brains for some way to handle Lane.

It was enough, he thought, to make him hate the girl; but still he could not find it in his heart to do so. Lane was all right. She was simply a victim of her environment. Her swiftness to take him up in what she had mistakenly thought was his love making, was due alone to her utter lack of knowledge of life. In no sense of the word was she blamable, and so it was up to him to see that she did not suffer disillusion, at least, too suddenly. Ormond had the uncommon and unhappy faculty of being able to see more sides of a question than the one that favoured his self-interest. He must go on; avoiding Floss and making love to Lane—though it killed him.

Almost a week passed with no developments. He had only one more day of grace before he must meet Lane at their rendezvous, and he had not one new, convincing argument to show her that she should go to school before getting married.

This morning, as was his usual custom, he rode first to Bunton's Pass. Near the pass he discovered a horse's tracks that he knew could not be that of a loose horse. Painstakingly he followed the tracks until they became lost in the road that led to

Hatcher's Shebang. Indubitably the rider had been poking about among the cattle. None had been driven off, however, so he rode on. But the delay had caused him to be several miles from Woodlaw's at the noon hour. This decided him to ride on to the lake and have dinner with the Clarks, or perhaps hunt up the cheese-maker he had met in Bunton's Pass, and who had cordially invited him to call.

It was perhaps two o'clock when he struck into a trail leading directly to Clark's cabin. He reined up his horse and stood deliberating for a moment, when suddenly Floss Woodlaw rode out of a small gulch almost upon him. There was no way to avoid her, and she was riding straight toward him with a humorous smile upon her face.

The girl's eyes were two-thirds closed as she approached—a dangerous sign which he had already learned to heed.

"Well, Mr. Detective, are you finding the woods full of clues these days?" she asked.

"Detective? Where do you get that idea?" he retorted.

She was not going to tell him that she had noticed his letter.

"Well, aren't you one?" she countered.

In a way he knew that he was one. In reality that was what Woodlaw had hired him for—that and as a gunman.

With this in mind he answered. "Well, perhaps I am. Is it such a disgrace?"

Floss had something entirely different in mind. To her, his admission merely confirmed her previous conviction that he was an employee of a cattle detective company.

"No; it isn't a disgrace—unless you're a poor one," she said. "Tell me, have you had any success—learned anything definite?"

"Not a thing," he admitted ruefully.

"Then I suppose you'll be leaving us soon?"

He could not resist the temptation to see if she really cared about his leaving. "I wonder if any one would really care," he inquired.

Her eyes were dancing with mischief.

"Why, I suppose dad would care—he'd hate to lose a good puncher. Men are hard to get up here."

He had gone too far to retreat.

"Would you care—any?"

"Well, I might care—to a certain extent," she said enigmatically.

His fascinated gaze played over her lithe, graceful form from the top of the large, soft-coloured beaver hat, to the tips of her shiny new riding boots. He knew he was going too far—had already gone too far for the predicament he was in—yet how could he back up? The blood was racing through his veins like a fever.

Suddenly he reached out and caught her bridle reins, stopping both their horses. Slowly she turned and faced him, and the mischief died out of her face. She had deliberately planned to make him finish the speech he had started in the little cubby-hole

post office, and now that he was on the verge of it she was frightened.

"I want to know to just what extent you care," he said huskily.

"Why, how can I tell?" she faltered.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Do you want to stay?" she parried weakly.

"God knows I do," he murmured hoarsely. Suddenly Lane Hatcher—all the Hatchers—the whole universe, for that matter, was forgotten. "I love you. You're the woman I've been looking for, for years. I want to stay in these mountains with you. I don't ever want to leave them or you."

Before the mighty sweep of his passion she felt all her flirtatious subterfuges swept away like the dead leaves of autumn before a mountain torrent. His arms were about her, and she was lifted bodily from her saddle. A moment more, and she lay unresisting in his arms.

"Do you love me?" he asked softly.

Her big eyes opened slowly, and her lips parted in a smile. He bent his head to hers, and she lifted her lips to meet his. Then she nestled in his arms in sweet content.

Suddenly he set her back on her horse, almost roughly.

"Excuse me," he said gruffly. "I've got to ride plumb up to that other pass, so I can't ride on with you. Good-bye."

Before the girl could catch her breath he was gone. She sat staring after him wonderingly.

Certainly he was a strange lover. She had confessed that she loved him, and it had sent him rushing off like that ! And yet she was not really sorry. The great tumultuous moment was gone, and she needed to be alone to think it over and calm down. Until that moment she had not been sure that she loved this handsome stranger ; but now she rode homeward, her heart singing a little wordless, tuneless song. At that moment there was nothing more in the world that she asked.

Ormond rode on, blindly furious with himself for his moment of weakness. He turned his horse off the trail, and plunged ahead aimlessly. Why, he asked himself a dozen times, had he given way to his feelings until he had settled with Lane Hatcher. It had been insanity, nothing less, he told himself again and again. The best he could now hope for from Lane was a three-year stay of execution. How then could he keep from hurting her and still shoot square with Floss ?

He knew that the honourable thing to do was to tell Floss the plain truth of the affair, but it was ridiculous to think that she or any other girl would consent to wait three or four years to see if another girl would finally reject the man she loved. It would kill him with Floss for ever, and that he could not bring himself to contemplate while the intoxication of her first sweet yielding was still upon him. The more he thought the more hopeless and confused he became.

CHAPTER XIV

HUNT DIGS A HOLE

IN the ancient feud which existed between the Hatchers and Bill Woodlaw, it had been old Bim Hatcher's custom to take his boys completely into his confidence. The business of one had been the business of all, and the four of them, being constantly on the alert, were able to repel all trespassers on their domain.

Hunt had been the first of the boys to show any signs of independent thinking, but until recently his slightly rebellious moods had passed unnoticed by his father, who was much more troubled by the evident discontent of his daughter. Lane had for some time been frankly a rebel. But at last Hunt's dissatisfaction had become so obvious that old Bim had been compelled to take notice, and thereafter Hunt was usually under a stern parental eye.

Old Bim was a mountaineer both by training and instinct, and so possessed in great degree the art of trailing, and of quietly effacing himself from sight when he wished to do so. In this way he had first learned of Hunt's infatuation with the daughter of his enemy, and it was so that he had been able to interfere in Hunt's and Joe Ormond's quarrel over her.

After ordering Hunt away from her at the point of a gun he learned from Hunt for the first time of the surreptitious meetings between them as children. A vast bitterness against his youngest son settled over him, and he proceeded to give Hunt a vitriolic tongue-lashing which made even that case-hardened young man quail. The stern and irrevocable gist of his orders were that Hunt should see Floss no more.

After his first outbreak of defiance Hunt had accepted the parental reprimand with outward humility, and an inward resolution to have the girl at whatever cost. His active mind was busy planning ways and means, while his father's blistering abuse was still ringing in his ears. Gradually his plan began to take form.

Hunt knew that his chances of getting Floss stood at exactly zero as long as the strange rider was around Woodlaw's ranch. The simple and obvious solution for that part of the problem was to remove that rider. The other things could be worked out later.

He was not foolish. He knew that out-and-out murder would be dangerous even in these isolated mountains. He devoted several hours of each day in gun practice, and he reasoned that in a fair fight with an even break he would have an equal chance with this stranger—but that was all. Hunt was essentially a conservative, and he greatly preferred to effect the removal without danger to himself. If everything else failed he might attempt an open gun fight, but he was not rushing that.

Assassination, it occurred to him, might be an effective solution, but this, too, offered its difficulties. The crime might just possibly be traced back to him. Also, he had learned by carefully watching his enemy in the days subsequent to their latest clash that the man was watching for that very thing. He never rode in identically the same place two mornings in succession unless it was some place clear in the open, and he never approached a place of possible ambush without first making a careful investigation. The only regularity about Ormond's movements which promised to be of any benefit to Hunt was that he rode across the mouth of Bunton's Pass every morning to turn back vagrant bunches of cattle. But it was several days before Hunt thought of a way to turn that into account.

Meantime, the close surveillance which old Bim kept over him was growing more and more irksome. At no hour of the day was Hunt permitted to get anywhere near the Woodlaw ranch but what Bim, or George, or Dave would bob up. Once he eluded them long enough to ride to Bunton's Pass early in the morning, and it was his tracks coming back which Joe had followed.

At last, however, Hunt's plan was complete, and he immediately set about the execution of it. Part of it required performance in the night, and this was the part that promised to be difficult. One factor in Hunt's favour, however, was that he occupied a room with Dave, and Dave was a person who took his sleeping as seriously as he did every-

thing else. When he went to bed to sleep he slept.

An hour or so before midnight Hunt got out of the house without being observed. After making sure of the fact, he saddled his horse and rode away, carrying a shovel on his back. He followed up the creek which ran by the Shebang for nearly a mile until he reached a waterfall. Here he dismounted and turned his horse loose to graze close by. Then he went a few feet below, and a little to one side of the falls and began to dig.

For an hour or more he toiled, and at the end of the time he had excavated a hole some three feet in diameter and deep enough to reach down to bedrock. Then he shaped it up in such a way that it could easily appear that some large object had been removed from it. To make it appear even more probable, Hunt carefully fed the most of the dirt he had dug up back into the stream until it dissolved into mud and washed away.

After this he dug a few smaller holes as though they had been but tentative beginnings, but abandoned when the right spot was located. Then Hunt leaned upon his shovel and smiled. That excavation would certainly make old Bim Hatcher see red. For years that stolen money of the dead and gone Bunton gang had been an obsession with the old man. His days and nights had been made miserable by the fear that some one else might come along and get the treasure which for ever seemed to elude him. The vicinity of the waterfall had been

one of the places old Bim had searched the hardest. A close observer might have noticed that the vicinity was mottled with little mounds that had been thrown up by Bim Hatcher's shovel years ago, except for a small space surrounding the place where Hunt had dug.

Hunt looked at his watch and hurriedly caught his horse. If his plan was to materialise he would have to be moving. An hour's hard riding brought him upon a small bunch of Woodlaw's cattle that were grazing toward Bunton's Pass. Without exception they belonged to the latest bunch that had been brought in, and so were yet unsettled on the range. For this reason they could be driven easily. Only once did they give him trouble ; that was when he had to drive them across the wagon road that led to Bunton's Pass. There they milled for a few minutes, but Hunt was cowpuncher enough to straighten them out and get them to stringing. He looked back at the place they had milled over and smiled. He knew that his enemy crossed the road at that point every morning, and that he would certainly take note of the tracks and their significance. It would be strange indeed if he did not follow in hot pursuit.

Hunt hurried the cattle along until he struck the stake-and-rider fence surrounding his own home ranch. Then he let them string along it until he reached the isolated panel, which was in reality a blind gate, or bars. He let the panel down, herded the cattle through it and let them scatter while he

put the panel back in place. But this he did in a slovenly way so that it was a concealed gateway no longer. He bunched the cattle again, drove them on to the creek, headed them up the stream until they were within a hundred yards of the waterfall, and then turned them again—this time toward another gate on the opposite side of the ranch.

Daylight broke upon him before he could get the cattle out of the fields, and he left them abruptly and headed for the Shebang. His horse was white was lather when he arrived. He was not greatly surprised to find his lank old father just saddling up a horse to go and look for him, and in spite of his well-laid plans, and his determination to carry them through he felt a slight trepidation as he faced the grim old man.

Before Hunt rode up George and Dave appeared and took their positions on either side of their father. If there was a family split coming it was plain where their allegiance would be.

"Well, *yuh* been out ag'in on some more o' yer cussedness, have ye?" old Bim demanded angrily.

"Not on any cussedness," Hunt denied vigorously. "I've just been doin' what you fellers ort to been doin' if ye hadn't been so damn blind."

"Meanin' what?" old Bim frothed.

"I've told *yuh* that that there stranger was up to somethin' crooked in here, but he wouldn't believe me—even tried to stop me from watchin' him. Well, I fooled *yuh*, anyway, an' I found out that

he's after the Bunton gang's money. More'n that, I found out he's already got it."

"Whut?" Old Bim's voice was a screech.

"I found out a while back that Bill Woodlaw had got him here to try to git that money, because, as you all know, Bill is afraid to go against us hisself. Las' night I slipped out an' got on his trail, an' follererd him to the falls up the creek here, an' watched him dig up a box o' money," Hunt explained icily.

"Hunt, ye're lyin'," Bim Hatcher growled. "Thet money ain't buried there, an' never was. He an' yer older brothers have dug that up inch by inch."

"Ye ain't got to take my word fer it," Hunt said coldly. "Come an' look."

"Git yer horses," Bim ordered Dave curtly. While Dave was gone, old Bim pursued his examination of Hunt.

"How come ye didn't stop 'im?"

"There was several reasons," Hunt declared. "For one thing it's more your funeral than 'tis mine. Besides, there was two of 'em. An' furthermore, I heard 'em say that they'd have to git some more instructions from Bill Woodlaw before they could locate the rest of it. They dug several little holes, but it seemed they couldn't find just the spot Woodlaw had told 'em about where the second cache was supposed to be. So they're comin' back."

"Did they say when?" Bim asked.

"They shore did." Hunt announced his climax shortly. "They said that rather'n have to take

chances on us discoverin' where they'd been diggin' they'd come back this mornin' as soon as they'd talked to Woodlaw. Or at least that one feller said he'd come."

"Damn Bill Woodlaw," old Bim howled. "I'll tear him limb f'm limb. I've knowed fer years he was after thet money, but I always figgered he didn't have guts enough to come atter it."

"How'd he come to know where it was all of a sudden?" George asked. It was the one question that Hunt dreaded.

"There was at least one feller left alive o' the Bunton gang who knew whar thet money was," Bim explained. "I always figgered thet Bill Woodlaw was tryin' to find out about it f'om thet man. If Hunt ain't lyin' I reckon mebbe he's been successful."

At this moment Dave returned with two saddle horses, and a minute later all four of them were returning to the falls. They tied their horses safely in the brush quite some distance away, and went in on foot. Old Bim's wrath was terrible when he saw the holes that had been dug. He had wasted years hunting for this money, and now an enemy had apparently dug it out from beneath his very nose.

"Didn't we dig right here?" George asked.

"We shore did," Bim said, glaring at Hunt.

Hunt was prepared for this. Not for nothing had he racked his brain for the right place to locate his little frame-up.

" You fellers make me tired——" He began his usual preface.

" What about you ? " George snorted. " We dug here when you was too young to help. Covered every foot of this ground."

" You didn't or you'd a-found the money, an' you can see that somebody has took somethin' outa here. If you tried to fill that hole up with the dirt that's left you couldn't."

" I know we dug every foot below these here falls, because I figgered it to be the likeliest place," Bim said, puzzled.

" You fellers are sure slow in the head," Hunt sneered. " Don't you see that these falls go back a foot or so every year? When the money was first buried it was right behind 'em, an' mebbe a little to one side. By the time you fellers dug fer it here there was probably a little water runnin' right over this hole. Since then the falls have gone back an' changed the course of the creek. You can prove it by the mounds of dirt you fellers left."

" Hunt's right," Bim Hatcher admitted, after looking the ground over carefully. " We never dug in this perticklar spot." A look of cold ferocity had settled over the old man's grim countenance.

" We'll waylay them fellers right here when they come back, an' then we'll settle with Bill Woodlaw once an' fer all," he snarled hoarsely.

" Look here," Hunt suggested earnestly. " Why all of us kill time here? Let me do some more

scoutin' around, an' if I find out anything else I'll come an' let ye know."

For the time being Hunt was in good favour, and his suggestion met with no objection—only a warning.

"It'll be all right, mebbe, but I don't want ye hangin' aroun' Woodlaw's place," his father said.

"I don't want to show myself—just keep an' eye out for what might happen," Hunt declared. Once on his horse he gave one short, cold, malignant laugh, and rode away. In his estimation Ormond was the same as dead. The moment he came near the waterfall following those cattle tracks he was done for. And if there was any row kicked up about it afterward Hunt would not be implicated. To make sure of that point he wasted no time at the Shebang, but rode rapidly toward the dairymen's shacks along the lake. His business there was to establish his alibi.

CHAPTER XV

A BULLET THROUGH THE BRUSH

LANE HATCHER had passed a sleepless night. Every nerve was a-tingle with anticipation, and she simply could not stay in bed. Long before daylight she threw on a coarse wrapper, and sat by her window looking out across the dark outline of the basin, splotched and mottled by high hills and patches of timber, to the background of mountain peaks standing guard with rows of gigantic teeth where the sharpest peaks pierced the sky.

Gradually the girl's emotions began to change. This day was to bring the consummation of Floss Woodlaw's scheme to force her lover into a marriage. If it worked it would mean a complete revolution in Lane's life; a transition from narrow, squalid surroundings to a world of romance and glory. But as she watched the familiar scene from her bedroom window, so vaguely but alarmingly different, her feelings changed, and a sense of depression settled over her. She could not banish the dread foreboding that something was destined to prevent the culmination of her dreams.

Reason told her that Floss's scheme could not fail. Floss had agreed to be responsible for all the details, and she was not the kind of girl to fail.

All Lane had to do was to avoid the members of her family, and make sure that none of them suspected in any way the little drama that was to be enacted at the falls that afternoon. Only one other detail had been left to Lane to attend to and that she reflected was a mere trifle.

The Hatchers were early risers, and before day-break Lane descended to the kitchen and cooked breakfast for the members of her family. It was not until Bim Hatcher came in to wash that the absence of Hunt was discovered, and though Bim and the other two boys grumbled about his absence, Lane paid little attention. Then, when she saw Hunt ride up, and later ride away with the others, she forgot all about it.

She washed up the dishes, leaving the coffee pot on the back of the stove, and a few other articles of food where Hunt could find them and warm them up for his breakfast if he came back while she was away. The Hatchers were men of uncertain habits, anyway, and she had long ago learned to accept their comings and goings complacently regardless of their reasonableness.

As soon as the house was in a semblance of order she threw on her riding rig and got her horse. She still had to attend to that one trifling detail, and she was taking no chances on forgetting it. She had promised Ormond to leave a handkerchief on the blind fence panel to let him know where to enter, and this she proceeded to do.

She knew the acres of her father's land as well as

she knew her own kitchen, and though she followed straggly cow trails, which looked as though they might be marks of some huge puzzle, she knew exactly which one to take at every junction, and presently she was at the blind panel.

The moment her eyes rested upon this opening in the stake-and-rider fence they flew open in surprise. Deceptive it might have been once, but it was so no longer. Lane had helped handle cattle long enough to be able to read cattle tracks as well as any puncher, and she was quick to see that cattle had been driven through the panel into her father's ranch ; and evidently in such a hurry that the man who had driven them had put the panel back up in a slovenly manner.

Satisfied that it could be none of her own family she raked her brain for some reason why any other man should drive cattle in there. Her thoughts flew swiftly to the various people she knew. Only one man besides the Hatchers knew of the existence of that gateway, and that was the man she expected to marry that very day. Even he did not know just where it was—he only knew that it was there, but he could locate it if he wished by testing every panel until he came to it. She knew that he suspected her folks of having stolen his horses ; but even so, why should he drive cattle in there, especially since he was to meet her there that very afternoon ? If it were he it was an act against her folks, and she could not believe that he would be guilty of anything so contemptible.

Floss Woodlaw was the only other person who knew of the secret gate. Could it be possible, Lane wondered, that Floss had told about it? She had faith in Floss, and yet it was barely possible that she had let it slip in some way that Bill Woodlaw had found it out. Lane shared her family's hatred and distrust of Woodlaw, and it occurred to her at once that Woodlaw might have wormed the information out of Floss, and taken advantage of it to work some diabolical scheme against the Hatchers.

At any rate she knew that it was a matter that needed instant investigation. She dismounted and surveyed the cow tracks critically. Beyond a doubt they were but a few hours old. Further investigation told her that the man who had driven those cattle in there had not returned. Realising that she might meet him at any moment she became as alert as a young wild cat. First, she carefully put the panel back up the way it belonged, and after a moment's thought she hung up a white handkerchief on the top rail with apparent carelessness. If she did not get back this would show her lover, as well as Floss and the preacher, where to get in. And if the unknown trespasser saw it he would certainly have cause for alarm.

Next the girl led her horse some distance from the trail and tied him securely. After this she hitched her belt around where she could get at her gun handily, and struck out along the trail of the cattle on foot, but keeping always in the shelter of the trees and bushes. It was for this reason that she

left her horse. She fully expected to meet the trespasser coming back unless he was already off the ranch, and she intended to get the drop on him.

Cautiously as an Indian, Lane made her way toward the creek. Though her eyes were shining with anticipation the set of her jaws was firm. This was work that she liked. Several times she thought she heard some one move, and each time she faded away behind a tree. Then, as nothing happened, she went on, her dingy corduroys blending admirably into the brown and gold of the under-brush.

Cautious as she was, however, she was seen before she saw any one. Woodcraft, superior to her own, was matched against her. Though the eyes of his two elder sons searched the brush without seeing a thing out of the ordinary, those of old Bim Hatcher, mountain-trained from his youth, were aware of movement among the trees. As yet he could not tell what it was, nor locate it two seconds in succession, but his rifle was gripped hard in his lean, muscular hands, ready to fire on the instant.

Finally, however, the girl flashed in sight just an instant. She melted from view immediately behind a tree, but old Bim had seen enough to know that it was a human being. Not once did it occur to him that it could be any one but the marauder who was robbing him of his long-coveted gold. He was fearful that the man would stumble on to George or Dave, who were lying in wait on the other side of the trail, take alarm and escape. Therefore, he felt

that it was not wise to delay. With his feet braced ready to snap rifle to shoulder on the instant he waited until he caught another fleeting glimpse of the trespasser.

Then he barked : " Hands up ! "

The command came so suddenly and unexpectedly that the girl's jump was purely involuntary. Even as she recognised her disadvantage her gun leaped to her hand, and her eyes sought the unknown enemy. Her leap had carried her behind a berry bush that screened her from her father's eyes except for a slight blur that she made against the background. But that was enough for a finished marksman like old Bim, who was determined to give his enemy no chance to escape.

There was the roar of a rifle, a short, quickly-throttled scream, and the girl pitched forward on her face. Old Bim and his two boys came running. Bim was the first to reach her. He turned her over with hands that shook. Already blood was streaming down over the girl's white face from a wound somewhere in her hair.

For a moment the three men stood as though stunned.

" Take—take her home, boys, an' one of ye git started to Dundee fer a doctor," old Bim ordered. Then he plunged blindly into the timber.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RIGHT THING TO DO

AFTER his wild, reckless declaration of love to Floss Woodlaw, Ormond had fled headlong toward the pass where he had first come into Cache Basin. Not that he had any definite purpose in going there—he simply wanted to think. He was up in the pass before he realised it, and his horse was panting heavily from the exertion of the rapid climb. Noticing his horse's weariness, Ormond dismounted, and permitted the horse to rest or graze as best suited him. Then he climbed to the top of a large rock that overlooked the entire basin, and seated himself.

His first thought when he had first looked over that basin was what a cattleman's paradise it would be, and now this thought recurred to him—but this time he shuddered in disgust. For the moment he was sick of everything. A great temptation to mount his horse and ride out of Cache Basin for ever assailed him. How could he go back and face Floss? Cache Basin, like the other places he had lived, had nothing to offer him but trouble.

But strong as this desire to get away from it all was, he quickly mastered it. He and Floss really did not matter nearly so much as some others. He was under a moral obligation to lift

Lane Hatcher out of her perilous environment, and he could not let her drop now.

Then there was Bill Woodlaw to be considered. At first he had not cared much for Woodlaw, but as he became better acquainted with him and with the local conditions, he began to respect the man as the defender of a hopeless cause. His physical fear of the Hatchers made his persistence in defying them all the more notable. And his cheerfulness in accepting their depredations aroused Ormond's admiration—and his loyalty. No ; his passage out of the basin was checked by barriers more impassable than those unscalable peaks.

He looked at his watch, and saw that it was just five o'clock. Twenty-four hours more, and he must meet Lane Hatcher inside her father's ranch and face the issue squarely. Again he ran over in his mind the various schemes that had occurred to him, but none of them seemed feasible. He had thought of endowing some one with the price of the girl's education, and having them step into the breach ; but when it came to finding such a person there was none. To ask any of her own people was out of the question. Of all the other people whom Lane knew, and they were pitifully few, he could think of none whom he could trust except, perhaps, Floss. A little thought showed him that it would be no solution of his own troubles to appeal to Floss for help, for the moment he made such an astounding proposal Floss would set out to learn the truth—and she would learn it. He was trapped ; that was all.

He mounted his horse, and rode hastily back to the ranch. It was a few minutes past the usual supper time, and he hurried to the house, hoping to get his meal over with before the other men left the table, and thus avoid a meeting with Floss. He threw open the door of the dining-room, and entered. To his astonishment there was not a man present, but Floss sat at the table, obviously waiting.

The girl had her chin cupped in the palm of one small hand. She regarded the man steadily through half-closed eyelids, her drawn mouth showed several dimples most flagrantly.

"Where have you been all afternoon, Mr. Sudden?" she asked.

"I've been up in the high pass—thinking," he vouchsafed.

"It must have been a weighty subject to make a cowpuncher nearly miss his supper," she said.

"Strangely enough, I've thought more during the last two minutes than I did all afternoon," he assured her.

"About what, for instance?"

"About you," he told her. He had himself well in hand, and was sure that he would not make a fool of himself again. Yet it was of no use to try to dissemble his real feelings for her.

"I'm surprised," she said mischievously. "You left in such a hurry that I was sure I was entirely forgotten."

"I'm not forgetting you for a moment, Floss,"

he said calmly. " Twice I told you that I loved you. Both times I was excited. Now I'm telling you again, and I am as cool as I ever was in my life. You're the one woman in the world that I want."

Their eyes met over the table. The impish light had faded from the girl's eyes, and they were wide open—and a bit scared. Slowly she reached her hand across the table.

Ormond dropped into a chair, and placed his own brown, muscular hand over the girl's slim, white one tenderly.

" I'm telling you this," he said, " because I want you to understand that if I don't talk love to you again for a while it will not be because I've changed. It'll be because I don't feel that I can with honour until certain things are cleared up."

The girl's face became a shade whiter.

" What is it you have to clear up ? " she asked.

" I can't tell you."

" You know, Joe, I don't really know a thing about you except your name." She noticed him wince. " You're asking me to take a great deal on trust."

" Can't you do it ? "

" Yes—I—I can take a great deal—on trust," she stated; then added hurriedly, with a smile: " You're not married, are you ? "

Ormond laughed. " I'd forgotten just how little you do know about my past. I've never been married in my life—never wanted to be until I saw you."

"Then why can't you tell me what it is you have to clear up?" she demanded, her woman's curiosity getting the better of her.

For a moment the temptation to make a complete confession assailed him, but he rejected it as unwise. He tried to think of a way to divert her mind into other channels.

"You have known, of course, that I'm suspected of being a cattle rustler—and of lying about losing my horses?" he stated.

"So that's what's bothering you, is it?" she asked, her mind jumping to a conclusion as he had anticipated. "That's nothing," she declared. "Every stranger is under a certain amount of suspicion."

"As long as I'm suspected," he said, "it's up to me to clear myself."

Floss smiled as she remembered that letter addressed to the Galt Detective Bureau. "Why need it interfere between you and me? I know that you are not a rustler."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your confidence," he said earnestly, "but there are some things an honourable man should not do. One is to make love to a girl until he is entirely free to do so. I forgot myself twice—perhaps it was on account of my anxiety to know whether you cared; but I'll not do it again."

"All right," she said, somewhat disappointedly. She arose from the table, and started toward an inner door. He stopped her.

"You do love me, don't you?" he asked simply,

his hands were on her shoulders, and his eyes probing hers.

She glanced up shyly. "More than any man in the world," she breathed softly.

For just an instant his grip on her shoulders tightened; then he lifted his hands slowly, and a second later she was gone.

Floss had not yet put in an appearance when Ormond rode away from the ranch the next morning. From the Chinese cook he had learned that Bill Woodlaw and Randall had gone to Dundee to join Brice the day before. Another cattle deal was on. This left only Frazier in the bunkhouse, and the ranch hand was still too sullen over his defeat to speak.

From the cook Ormond secured a lunch, as he had no desire to see Floss again until he had kept his appointment with Lane Hatcher. Also, contrary to his usual custom, he did not ride toward Bunton's Pass the first thing. For one reason he had neglected part of his usual ride on the other end of the circle the day before, and for another he figured that he could ride around by the pass in the afternoon on his way to keep his appointment with Lane.

So it happened that a fundamental part of Hunt Hatcher's well-planned scheme did not work out according to schedule, and it was well past noon when Ormond discovered the cattle tracks which crossed the wagon road. They were getting obscured by this time, but, as Hunt had foreseen, Ormond was at great pains to make out whether the cattle had been driven, or had trailed across of their own

free will. First he saw that there was no cattle in sight, and then he made sure that none had gone through the pass. Returning to the place in the road where the cattle had milled he laboriously took up the task of following them. Before long he had definitely ascertained that the cattle had been driven away—and that toward Hatcher's Shebang.

All his animosity for the Hatcher outfit came to the surface, and he followed the trail relentlessly. At the secret panel he stopped and considered the situation with worried brow. The bit of white handkerchief on the panel reminded him forcibly of his engagement with Lane. He wondered if it could be a trap, or a mere coincidence that the stolen cattle had been driven through there just before his entrance. Deciding on the latter probability he let down the panel, led his horse through and replaced it. Then he followed the tracks again, but more circumspectly. He realised that he had crossed the dead line now, and that he would be shot on sight by Bim Hatcher or any of his boys if they saw him.

Presently he reached the creek and recognised the landmark which was to let him know where he was to turn to find the waterfall, at which he was to meet Lane. He looked at his watch, and found that he had taken more time following the tracks than he had intended. It was now five o'clock on the dot. He must let the cattle go and keep his appointment.

He swung off his horse and proceeded up the

creek on foot. Very soon he saw where the creek plunged over a twenty-foot embankment. As it was behind the falls that he was to meet the girl, he made no effort to learn if she was there until he actually reached the spot. He walked around the falls and stopped as though paralysed. Lane was not within the range of his vision, but Floss Woodlaw was. Besides Floss stood two men. One was the dairyman, Clark ; the other a man dressed in ministerial garb.

Floss's start of surprise was fully equal to that of Ormond's ; though she was the first to recover.

"Why, Joe," she exclaimed ; "what are you doing here ? "

A wave of colour swept over his tanned cheeks. How was he going to tell her without revealing everything ? He looked about for Lane, and could not tell whether he was relieved or not that she was not in sight.

"Just now I have been following a bunch of your father's cattle," he temporised while he tried to make up his mind.

"Have you seen Lane ? " Floss asked.

"Not to-day," he replied.

"I guess I'll have to let you into a little secret," Floss said. "We were to meet her here to-day at four o'clock. She had an appointment at five in this place with the man she's going to marry. This sweetheart of hers wants to send her away to school first, but she don't think it's right to take his money unless they are married, so we planned

to surprise him by having a minister and a licence all ready for him. She hasn't shown up yet, and her man may come any moment. What are we going to do?"

Ormond's head was swimming so dizzily that connected thought was an impossibility. Only one thing seemed reasonably clear; that as yet Floss did not know the identity of the man Lane intended to marry. Then he grasped the fact that he might expect Lane to appear at any minute, and not only the damning truth be revealed, but he would have to go through the ceremony with her in the presence of the girl he really loved, and who loved him. He could not explain there that he loved Floss, and she would not. It was unthinkable. The only thing was to get away before Lane came. Explanations would have to be made later.

But before he could move or speak Floss was continuing: "This lover of Lane's is a terribly good man, and evidently he just wants to give her a chance at some one else, but such self-sacrifice is foolish. She'll never do any better than to marry a man like that. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said in his agony. "Maybe it's all a joke, and she don't intend to get married."

"I know better than that," she flared. "Lane wouldn't have permitted me to send Mr. Clark here clear out to Dundee for the minister if she hadn't intended to carry it through. It's deadly serious with Lane. I'm afraid something has

happened to her. Her father has got to hear about it and is keeping her, or something."

"I'll go and find out," Ormond offered, desperately determined to prevent Lane from coming if it was humanly possible.

"What can you do, Joe?" Floss asked anxiously.
"You're an enemy down there."

"I've faced them before, and I can again," he declared, starting away. At that moment nothing would have suited him better than to ease his feelings in a brush with the Hatchers.

"Wait, I'll go with you," Floss cried peremptorily, seizing his arm. "You gentlemen wait for us, please," she added to Clark and the preacher. The next moment she was stepping briskly down the trail with a most unhappy puncher.

All avenues of escape were closed to him now. With a titanic effort of will he composed his thoughts, and got a grip on himself. When they were well away from the falls he suddenly stopped and turned the girl around to face him.

"Wait, Floss, I've got something to say to you," he said.

"Oh, not now," she protested impatiently. "I have a feeling that something's happened to Lane, and the poor girl has had trouble enough. Our affairs can wait."

"It's about her I want to talk to you," he said quietly.

She stopped abruptly, a look of curiosity on her face.

"What do you know about her?" she asked.

"Didn't Lane ever tell you the name of the man she thought she was going to marry?" he asked.

"Why, not in so many words, but it's a cheese-maker by the name of Mark Brown," she declared positively.

"No. Lane broke off with the cheese-maker some time ago because, I'm afraid, of misunderstanding the intentions of another man," he informed her in a low voice.

All the girl's impatience to walk on had suddenly left her. There was something in his voice which told her that what he had to say was serious.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said.

Without holding anything back, or offering excuses, he told her of his plan to send Lane to school, and of her innocent misunderstanding of his intentions.

Floss listened to him in silence. Only that her naturally white skin gradually assumed a whiter pallor, and that she continually plucked little twigs from a nearby bush showed her emotion. But her first words, as he had feared, showed that she had failed to grasp one essential part of his thought.

"And you let her make that mistake—let her go right on thinking that you cared for her, while all the time you were making love to me?" she asked in a dull, flat voice.

"Listen, Floss, please," he pleaded. "I couldn't

help making love to you because I love you so much. You meant more——”

“Stop!” she ordered curtly. “What you think of me is beside the question. You deliberately misled Lane—a girl who has had nothing but trouble all her life.”

“But it was to save her from humiliation that I let her think the way she did after she made that awful mistake.”

“I hardly see how she could have made such a mistake unless you gave her some cause for it,” she said, her jealousy for the moment getting the better of her.

“But I never thought of such a thing,” he protested.

“The question is, what are you going to do about it?” she asked curtly. “You can’t crawl out of it now.”

“My God, Floss, I can’t marry her when I——”

“Stop,” she ordered again peremptorily. “We’ll leave all side issues out of the discussion. If it would break her heart to find out you were fooling her a few days ago, it will be worse now if you back out when the plans for the wedding are all made.”

“But I had no hand in making the plans,” he said weakly.

“That makes no difference. There’s only one honourable thing for you to do,” she said crisply.

“I guess that’s right,” he agreed miserably.

“Still, I won’t marry her now. I’ll give you money

to send her to school for one year. Then if she still wants me, I'll come across."

"And that's the best you'll do to make amends?" she asked cuttingly.

"It's more than I ought to do. I never dreamed that she'd think I was making love to her. You are—"

"That'll do," she snapped. "Of course it would be foolish to try to go on with it to-day, but if you are any kind of a man at all you'll go through with this at the first opportunity. Now you can go back, and tell the minister and Mr. Clark that their services won't be needed to-day. I'll go on down to Hatcher's and try to smooth things over with Lane."

"I guess I've made a hopeless mess of things by trying to do a girl a good turn, but I—"

But Floss was hurrying away toward Hatcher's Shebang, leaving him standing disconsolately alone.

CHAPTER XVII

IMPRISONED !

HUNT HATCHER had gathered up the cattle he had driven from the range, and taken them out through another gate, and turned them again upon the range. Then he had ridden to one of the dairies on the lake and made himself agreeable until well after noon. All the time he was seething with impatience to know how his scheme had worked out, but he was taking no chances on having his alibi impeached if anything went wrong.

When he did get back to the Shebang and learned that it was his sister who had fallen a victim of his plot, he was shaken for a moment, but he quickly recovered.

"Is she dead?" he asked his father, as he gazed down at the white-faced girl on the bed.

"No; but I kain't tell how long she'll live till the doctor gits hyar," old Bim answered, never once taking his eyes off the girl.

There were a number of things Hunt wanted to discuss with him, but he felt that the time was not opportune. He walked out and downstairs, passing George who was sitting disconsolately at the foot of the stairs, without a word. He went out toward

the stables, but chancing to look up he was amazed to see Floss Woodlaw walking rapidly toward the house. She was coming from the interior of the ranch, and was plainly under great mental stress. Hunt's first thought was that she had discovered some way that Lane had been shot. With the speed and stealth of a wolf he hurried to meet her before she came in sight of the house.

"Hallo, Floss," he greeted, striving to make his tone appear casual. "Gee, it's a surprise to see you here."

The girl brought up short, and surveyed him with distaste. It was the first time she had seen Hunt since his rather brutal announcement of his intention to marry her.

"Where is Lane?" she asked bluntly.

"Don't you know?" he countered.

"I wouldn't have asked you if I had known," she said curtly.

"What d'ye want of her?"

"That is none of your business," she retorted.

With a tigerish spring he leaped and caught her arm. "Don't git funny with me," he warned. "If you git to see her you'll have to tell me what yer business is."

Floss recognised her helplessness. After all, she reflected, what difference did it make who knew of Ormond's duplicity. It was really her own acute resentment that urged her to speak.

"Lane was to meet me and several other people at the falls this afternoon to marry a man named

Ormond who has been staying at our ranch. She hasn't showed up, and I want to know why."

For a moment Hunt was dumbfounded. "D'ye know what ye're talkin' about?" he demanded.

"I certainly do," Floss said crisply. "And if you think anything of your sister you'll help her accomplish it. If your father is making trouble for her you ought to help her. Now will you let me go?"

"See here," said Hunt gruffly, retaining his hold of her arm, "how long has this thing been goin' on?"

"You mean how long since they've been—been engaged?" Floss asked, a wave of colour coming to her face despite her efforts to appear nonchalant.

"Yeah."

"I don't know. The material point is that they are engaged, and that Lane failed to keep the appointment," Floss said brusquely.

"Did this Ormond feller show up?" Hunt queried.

"He did."

"Say, I thought he was stuck on you? You know I saw him actin' soft to you not so many days ago. How come he to be thick with Lane all of a sudden?"

"You had better ask him," Floss said tartly.

"There's somethin' fishy here, an' I'm a-goin' to find out what it is," Hunt growled. "Has that feller been double-dealin' with you girls?"

"My relations with Mr. Ormond are no concern of yours." Though she tried to speak in a perfectly

detached manner there was a little tremor of hurt pride in her voice which Hunt did not overlook.

Suddenly he was filled with an unholy joy; though he kept it from showing in his face or voice.

"I guess I see through a lot more of this business than you do," he said reflectively. "You see, this feller's real reason fer bein' in here is because he'd found out about the old Bunton gang's money. This mornin' we heard a shot, an' bein's as we was on our horses we saw this feller ridin' away. Not long after that we found Lane with a bullet through her head. This here story of your'n explains a lot."

"I don't believe it," Floss flared hotly.

"You don't, huh?" Hunt asked, with a leer. "You come with me an' I'll show you." He almost dragged the girl through the yard and into the house. A moment more and Floss stood in Lane's little crudely furnished bedroom, gazing down at the pitiful, unconscious figure of the girl who lay on a rough, patch-work quilt, with her head swathed in the rude bandages which her father had managed to put on.

Old Bim Hatcher was standing by his daughter's bedside. At Floss's entrance he frowned. For a moment he wrestled with his conflicting emotions. Finally his desire to have some woman attend to Lane conquered his hatred of the house of Woodlaw. In obedience to his son's urgent gestures he went outside.

"Well, dad, what're ye goin' to say when they

ask who shot Lane?" Hunt demanded bluntly, when they were outside of the house.

Old Bim's leathery features worked helplessly. For once in his life he was unstrung and in doubt, and Hunt seized the opportunity to assert his own supremacy.

"We've just naturally got to stick together, an' lay it on to that there stranger. We got to swear that we seen him shoot Lane an' ride away." Later on Hunt intended to modify that by eliminating himself from the swearing, but now he would risk no distractions from the main issue.

"Hunt's right fer once," George, who had followed them, commented emphatically.

"I wouldn't hear tell of it if the skunk hadn't been hyar to rob us," old Bim said slowly.

"It'ud be a heap better'n to have it known that you killed yer own girl," Hunt said harshly, a hint of a threat in his voice. "The thing to do is to send fer the sheriff at once, an' land this feller before he wises up."

"I don't believe in callin' in the law," said Bim Hatcher. "I've lived fer nigh on to seventy years without hit, an' I won't begin now if hit'll leave me alone. If hit does come then this other feller must pay, fer he murdered Lane jest as sure as if he'd fired the shot that done hit."

"What're you goin' to do, then?" Hunt demanded.

"Wait till we see how Lane's goin' to come out, an' before we start lawin' we'll see if we can't handle

it ourselves. We'll go on the trail o' Bill Woodlaw an' this maraudin' skunk ourselves," Hatcher announced, with the air of one who expected to be obeyed.

As Hunt had anticipated, Floss refused to leave her friend that night. She had requested Hunt to carry word to her mother that she would be away for the night, and Hunt had gladly consented. A dead line against the Hatchers had never been laid down on the Woodlaw ranch, so his errand was easily accomplished.

Except for loosening her mop of golden hair, Floss made no attempt to secure any ease during the night. The first part of the night old Bim sat across the bed from her, his grim old features entirely expressionless. Hunt occasionally came in, but each time he quickly drifted out.

About midnight Dave arrived with the doctor from Dundee. Followed an anxious hour while the doctor examined the wounded girl, and dressed her head.

"Will she live?" Floss breathed when the doctor had finished his work.

The doctor smiled. "It's almost a miracle, but the skull isn't even fractured. The bullet glanced from the side of her head without doing any great harm. When she regains consciousness she'll not be bad off at all. Good care and quietness for a couple of weeks and she will be all right.

"If I were you," he said to Hatcher, "I'd leave Miss Woodlaw alone with her the remainder of the

night, and in the morning I'd try to get some woman to help Miss Woodlaw take care of your daughter. How did the accident occur ? "

" She ain't said yet," old Bim said quickly and simply. Then he went out and Floss settled herself for an all-night vigil.

The doctor had scarcely left when Hunt Hatcher came in.

" Who was goin' to be witnesses to that weddin' ? " he asked.

" Mr. Clark and myself," Floss said wearily, wanting only to be rid of him. Seeing her attitude Hunt went out, and she was left alone until morning. Over and over this question was running through her mind : Could Joe Ormond really have attempted to murder Lane Hatcher to keep from marrying her ? She discounted Hunt's story that Ormond was after an alleged buried treasure. That, even if true, would hardly provide motive enough. But, assuming that what he had told her was true ; that he had unwittingly become engaged to Lane while loving another girl, the removal of Lane would be the short way out of his difficulties. She was quick to see what a court of law would think of the matter.

In spite of this motive ; in spite of the direct assertion of the Hatchers that they had seen him riding away immediately after the shooting, she could not absolutely convince herself that he was a cold-blooded murderer. What must she do when he was accused of the crime ? Why had not Bim

Hatcher accused him to the doctor instead of evading the question? Not knowing the peculiar idiosyncrasies of the Hatcher mind she could find no answer to the last two questions. The first one, difficult as it was, was yet answerable, and she set herself to it gamely. Only one frail fact could have a bearing in his favour. He had returned to keep the appointment at five o'clock. But any number of reasons could be advanced as to why he had done that even if he was guilty. That one fact alone could not acquit him. But if she told her story, it would most certainly convict him.

Morning was coming on, cold and bleak. Thin, gray clouds hovered threateningly close above the timber tops, almost obscuring the formidable rim of peaks which enclosed the basin. Even as Floss gazed out the clouds gave way before marching hordes of heavier, darker ones, completely shutting out her view of the mountains. It seemed to her that this arbitrarily narrowing landscape was typical of the problems that were driving her to desperation.

"I'll never tell. I don't—I can't believe that he could be guilty," she murmured to herself. And yet she knew that he faced almost certain conviction even if she did keep silent, if he was accused and brought to trial. She must do more. "I love him," she thought, involuntarily making a wry face. "I'll tell him to get away."

There was a stirring on the bed behind her, and she turned to see Lane regarding her with wide open, questioning eyes.

"What's happened?" Lane asked wonderingly.

"Lie perfectly still, dear," Floss advised gently.

"You had an accident, but you'll be all right soon."

The girl on the bed lay quietly for a few minutes while she seemed to be trying to piece things together in her mind.

"I remember," she said presently, "that I was goin' to put a rag on the fence to let him know where to come in—and, oh, yes—I was goin' to be married," she broke off while a blush mounted to her face. "Has—has he come yet?"

"That was yesterday, Lane. Joe has come—and gone."

"I remember now. I was follerin' some cow tracks, an' all at oncet I heard somebody yell—an'—an'—that was all."

"Do you know what hurt you?" Floss asked eagerly.

"No, I don't—'less the feller I was follerin' took a shot at me," Lane said after a pause.

That, apparently, was all the girl could remember. After a time she went quietly to sleep. As soon as Bim Hatcher came in, Floss excused herself on the plea that she must keep her mother from worrying.

"I sent George after Clark's woman," Bim said.

"I'll be back this afternoon," Floss promised.

To her surprise old Bim made no objections. As she rode away it seemed to Floss that the very air around Hatcher's Shebang was heavy with the dank feel of tragedy, and she dreaded to return. Before going to the house after her arrival at her own

ranch, she knocked at the bunkhouse door, and it was opened by Joe Ormond.

He gave a start of surprise at sight of her white, fatigued face. "Why—why—" he began, but Floss cut him short.

"The reason Lane didn't keep her appointment yesterday was because some one shot her," she announced curtly. "The Hatchers say it was you—say they saw you riding away right afterward."

Despite the coldness in her voice she watched him narrowly. Somewhat to her annoyance he showed no sign of emotion. Not a muscle moved.

"Is the girl dead?" he asked quietly.

"Not yet," she stated, turning away.

He let her go, and went back in the bunkhouse, and sat down. The curt manner in which Floss had told him left him but one conclusion—she believed him guilty, but was giving him a chance to get away. To run away would be to admit his guilt, and that he would not consider.

Finally he went out to the stables and saddled a horse. The Hatchers seemingly had begun the battle the day before when they had stolen the cattle; this fresh accusation was simply a continuation of it. How Lane had been shot, or what the results might be it was useless to conjecture at this time. It was time, he felt, for him to take the aggressive—and the trail led straight to Hatcher's Shebang.

It did; but not in quite the manner he expected.

As he stepped outside the stable ahead of his horse he felt the business end of a six shooter poked into his ribs from right and left.

"Stan' still," snapped the stern voice of old Bim Hatcher.

Realisation that the first move toward his gun would mean instant death saved his life. He stopped motionless. Bim Hatcher stepped out from behind a wall, and Hunt followed him. The men on either side of the door were George and Dave.

Bim swiftly took possession of Ormond's gun. "We've got the drop on ye this time an' no mistake," he said. "Take keer how ye han'le yerself. Git on yer horse."

Assisted by the strong arms of George and Dave, Ormond was mounted. Resistance at such a time he knew was worse than useless. His only chance was to wait until their vigilance could relax.

They rode away silently, cutting the fence to avoid going to the gate and getting in sight of the ranch house.

"Now we kin talk," said the senior Hatcher.

"If we have anything to talk about," Joe said calmly.

"Thar's two things ye've got to do, stranger," Bim said. "Ye've got to tell us whar ye put the money ye dug up fer Bill Woodlaw on my place, an' ye've got to tell us if Woodlaw knows whar there is any more."

"I think you've got your wires crossed slightly, Hatcher," Ormond said coolly. "I never dug up a

thing on your place except a lot of your cussedness—and possibly a scandal."

"Don't deny it," old Bim screeched. "Hunt watched ye, an' the rest of us saw whar ye'd been a-diggin'. Thet money belongs to me, an' I'm goin' to hev it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ormond said steadily, though inwardly he wondered what it all meant.

"We know too, how ye double dealt with my gal to git an excuse to git in thar," old Bim charged.

"You're a liar," Ormond said flatly.

"Ye'll sing softer afore we're through with ye," Hatcher said. "Boys"—he addressed his stalwart sons—"we'll take him to the Shebang whar we kin hold him. Then two of us'll ride inter the lower country till we find Bill Woodlaw. We'll give him jest one chance to give up thet money, an' if he don't we'll kill him like a dog. Then if this feller don't come clean we'll decide on whether we turn him over to the law fer shootin' Lane, or string him up to a tree like the cur he is."

Ormond was too busy trying to fathom this latest development to make a senseless attempt to resent the insult. This buried money business was something new, but he could make nothing of it except that they took it for granted that he was in league with Woodlaw against them, and that Woodlaw was in great danger.

"What do you think Woodlaw had to do with that money?" he hazarded once.

" You couldn't have knowed about hit if it hadn't o' been for him," Bim said. " But he's a-goin' to pay," he added bitterly.

" I didn't turn over a thing to Woodlaw," Ormond said. " He can't tell you where it is because he don't know."

" One of ye'll tell," Hatcher said grimly. " He needs killin', anyway. An' if he can't tell you'll have to."

There was a grim finality in his tone which admitted of no argument. Ormond sought desperately for a chance to lift a gun from one of the men, and face big odds, but there was no chance. Not long after he was locked securely in one of the many log cabins of the Shebang, one which obviously had seen the same service before. Left alone, he went over it inch by inch, and presently was forced to acknowledge that escape was well nigh impossible.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF BIM HATCHER

Floss put in a strenuous half-hour explaining her actions to her mother, who, instead of being reassured by Hunt Hatcher's explanations the night before, had put in the night in a state of near hysteria. Then, when Floss had finally convinced her that she could not have done otherwise, she had to break the news that she was going back. This time the woman's nerves seemed about to crack completely, and to prevent it Floss had to suggest that her mother go back with her to the Hatcher's. After considerable grumbling her mother consented.

While they were getting ready Frazier came in.
"I want you to go down in the valleys and take this note to father," Floss told the man. "Don't come back until you find him."

"All right," Frazier said, taking the note. Soon he was on the road to Dundee with it and, as it happened, just one hour ahead of old Bim Hatcher and his son, George.

A couple of hours after Frazier had left, Hunt Hatcher again appeared on the Woodlaw ranch.

"I want to take a little ride with you before we

go back to our place," he said, after calling Floss to the door.

"I don't think I care to," Floss said coldly.
"Mother is going back with me to your father's place."

"I think you will," Hunt jeered, pulling a yellowed newspaper from his pocket. "Take a squint at this."

Floss took the newspaper, a county paper published at the county seat. The column Hunt indicated was filled with the descriptions of brands and ear-marks of cattle that had been lost or stolen.

"Well?" she asked, when she had glanced over the column.

"That's what I want you to take this here ride fer," Hunt said. "I've got an idee that you an' me together can find the most of them rustled cattle." There was a challenge in his look which enraged her.

"All right," she acquiesced, "I'll go." A few minutes later she appeared in her riding costume. A belt hung loosely about her waist, with a revolver that hung pendant from it. She was taking no chances on Hunt's strong-arm tactics again.

He grinned as he noticed her precaution.

Meantime Frazier's pony was throwing dirt on the way to Dundee. He reached the town about five o'clock, and by an accident managed to catch Woodlaw and Brice in town.

Woodlaw took the note, and read :

"DEAR DAD,—I want you to come back here as soon as you get this. Somebody shot Lane Hatcher,

and they are accusing Joe Ormond of it. I don't believe he is guilty, and I want your help. The Hatchers have also been inquiring for you. I don't know what it means.

FLOSS."

Woodlaw studied the note perplexedly. "Brice," he said at length; "you an' Randall better hold our new bunch of cattle in our friend's pasture fer a few days. I'm afraid I've got to go back to the basin."

Frazier could tell him very little about the shooting of Lane Hatcher—nothing, in fact, except that Floss had spent the night at the Shebang. He had not learned of the shooting until he had surreptitiously read Floss's note.

Woodlaw's first concern was to see if anything was known about it in town. It took considerable time and tact to accomplish this without giving anything away himself. Finally he learned that the doctor had been to the Shebang, and that his report was that it was an accident. He stepped out of the Gem Saloon where he had heard this, determined to talk to the doctor himself—and came face to face with Bim Hatcher and George.

For a moment the two older men faced each other without a word. Then a look of incredible fury came over Bim Hatcher.

"Bill Woodlaw," he quavered, "the time has come fer an accountin' between us. Ye broke yer 'greement, an' sent a man on to my place. I want the money he dug up."

Woodlaw stepped out in the street, and laughed. If his lips formed a sneer it was concealed behind his heavy, drooping moustache. Frazier slunk back against the saloon door.

" You ain't been out o' Cache Basin fer so long, Bim, that you don't know just how to act," Bill Woodlaw said. " Come in an' have a drink, an' we'll talk it over."

" I'll not drink with ye. We'll settle this right here. Come away from that building whar we kin talk without bein' heard. Remember there's two of us, an' the fust hostile move means a bullet fer you," old Bim said fiercely.

Woodlaw glanced around a bit anxiously. The street was almost deserted, and one glance at Frazier told him no help was to be expected from that quarter. The odds were strongly against him. Dense, George Hatcher might be, but he was an expert gunman, and he stood ready to back his father up at any cost. Furthermore, the Hatchers' hands rested on their guns, and at Woodlaw's first move to reach for his they would go into action. There was nothing for him to do but obey them. But as he started into the street his movements were far cooler than might have been supposed by one who had listened to his profession of abject fear of these men before him.

" Come on, Frazier," he said. " We'll go talk to 'em."

" We don't need Frazier," Bim Hatcher rasped, and on the hint Frazier effaced himself.

Woodlaw walked ahead of the Hatchers some fifty feet down the street. Then he turned and asserted quietly, " You're mistaken, Bim. I ain't sent no man on to your ranch to dig for money."

" That's a lie. If ye didn't, how come ye to hire that stranger, Ormond ? " Bim challenged.

" To tell you the truth, Bim, I hired him to help me run more cattle. There was a lot of good grass goin' to waste an' when I found out he wasn't afraid of nobody I hired him."

" Don't lie to me," Bim snarled. " Ye knowed that if ye ever teched that money me or my boys 'ud git ye. So ye hired that dirty skunk, an' he made love to my gal a-purpose to git inside my ranch. We see him dig up that money, an' heard him say you'd told him whar it was. I don't know how ye found the place less'n it was from Curley Jake, but if ye don't cough up ye don't leave this spot alive."

" I guess you've got me," Woodlaw said, with a' wry face. " I've just changed the gold into bills, an' they're in my saddle-bags yonder, except what Ormond got."

The Hatchers' faces lighted up with triumph. " Go an' see if he's tellin' the truth, George," Bim directed.

George hurried away toward Woodlaw's horse which stood perhaps a hundred feet away. The two older men faced each other without a word until George was nearly to the horse. Bim Hatcher stood

with both hands resting on the handles of his guns. Woodlaw's hands were at his sides.

Then Woodlaw said quietly, " You've been an awful fool, Bim. There never was but about five thousand dollars buried at the Shebang—an' I dug that up years an' years ago."

" What? " Bim demanded, his eyes bulging.

" You've been mighty useful to me, Bim, with yer queer ideas an' your cravin' for that money; but your usefulness is over."

Just the fraction of a second too late old Bim realised that he was being tricked. He started a yell of warning to George, and began to pull his guns. But before his guns were free of the holsters, Woodlaw's hands had flashed to his hips and back with an incredibly swift movement. One revolver spouted smoke, and a moment later the tall, lank form of old Bim Hatcher was stretched in the dust an unfired revolver in each hand. His yell of warning to George had never been finished.

George Hatcher had whirled at the sound of the shot, drawing his guns as speedily as he knew how, but like his father he was hopelessly outclassed as a gunman by this man whom he had been taught from infancy to hate. He did manage to pull trigger once as Woodlaw's first bullet ploughed into his chest, but it was an aimless shot, the bullet striking the ground twenty feet in front of him.

With cool, deliberate aim, Woodlaw sent two more bullets into George Hatcher's body as his victim staggered forward. Then George collapsed,

and Woodlaw put up his guns. Beneath the heavy, drooping moustache his teeth showed in a cruel, wolfish grin. For years he had known that sooner or later he must have just this kind of settlement with Bim Hatcher, and his carefully planned propaganda of cowardice had not failed of its purpose. His victims had been too sure. Brice had said there was one faster gunman than Ormond—he meant Woodlaw.

The street was rapidly filling with people, and Woodlaw walked over to the marshal and surrendered his guns.

"They were two to one, and I shot in self-defence," he said coolly.

"Danged if it ain't old Bim Hatcher of Hatcher's Shebang," the marshal said. "I reckon ye ain't in much danger o' hangin' fer killin' him, if it wasn't in self-defence. Ye orta git a medal."

Woodlaw's accustomed jovial grin was now securely back in place.

"Before you take me to jail I'd like to have a word with my hired man," he requested.

"Certainly," the marshal agreed readily.

Woodlaw moved away with Frazier, beyond ear-shot, and talked with him a few minutes. Then he went quietly to jail.

Frazier, Brice, and Randall reached Woodlaw's ranch early the next morning and, finding the place deserted, decided that the women and the Chinese cook had gone to Hatcher's Shebang.

"You ride over there an' tell Floss what's

happened, Frazier, while me an' Randall git busy," Brice directed. "Then you come back an' help unless she gives you other orders."

Not long after, Floss met Frazier in the Hatcher's yard.

"Where is father?" the girl demanded before Frazier could speak. Her face was so white and drawn that even Frazier was startled.

"He's in jail fer killin' Bim an' George Hatcher," Frazier whispered; "but he said you wasn't to worry—he'll be out on bail in a day or so."

The girl's shoulders drooped, and she hid her face in her hands.

"Aw, say now, it's nothin' to worry about," Frazier roughly attempted to comfort her. "It was self-defence—he'll come clear."

Floss took no notice of this.

"Go to the corral and tell Hunt Hatcher to come here," she ordered.

CHAPTER XIX

HUNT HATCHER'S TRIUMPH

HUNT sought Floss with a triumphant smirk upon his face. Though the girl had sent for him she recoiled from him with an involuntary shudder.

"Frazier just told me that my father is in jail for killing your father and George," she announced bluntly.

Hunt gave a slight start of surprise. Then his face was screwed up in thought, but he expressed no sorrow by word or sign.

"That puts your dad in a purty bad way, don't it? Won't be able to help himself much, will he?" he asked.

Floss looked at him straight-eyed without replying.

"You see now, don't yuh, right where I've got yuh?" Hunt quizzed. "I reckon I could git yer dad hung just as easy now as I could send him over the road."

Floss nodded agreement.

"I'll accept your terms," she said icily. "Just as soon as a decent time has passed, I'll marry you."

Hunt grinned again, triumphantly. "A decent time will have passed as soon as Clark can git back from Dundee with a preacher. We'll have the

weddin' an' the funeral together, so's not to have to monkey with the preacher twice."

"Before your folks are buried?" she asked incredulously.

"Sure," he replied. "Before the funeral—then you can be among the mourners." And she gazed upon him with unutterable loathing.

"I reckon we'll make it a double weddin'," he said. "This here Ormond bein' engaged to Lane I reckon I'll have 'em spliced at the same time."

Despite herself a spasm of pain shot through her. Hunt saw it.

"So you are stuck on him after all. That'll make it nice—marryin' me right before his eyes," he gloated.

"Hunt," she said, "if you have any decent feelings at all you'll say nothing about that. I'll tell you the truth. I do love Ormond, and he loves me. He never meant to get engaged to Lane. He was just sorry for her, and wanted to send her away to school, and she misunderstood. But he was man enough to carry out his part of the bargain rather than humiliate her."

"Tryin' to kill her didn't look like it," Hunt said. He was enjoying the situation immensely.

They had been moving slowly toward the house, and for several minutes had been standing by the doorway at the foot of the stairs.

"I don't believe he shot her," Floss flared.

"Who did?" Hunt countered genially.

"Anyway, that part of your scheme won't work,"

she retorted. "I'm sorry for Lane, but I told Mr. Ormond that you were framing him up for that shooting, and by this time he'll be where you can't touch him."

Hunt laughed uproariously.

"Listen, kid," he said at last, "I've got to kick the last prop clean out from under you. Dave is guardin' that Ormond feller less'n three hundred feet from where you're standin'. He'll marry Lane, or he'll stan' trial fer shootin' her."

"He'll not have to marry me, Hunt. I been standin' here listenin' to every word you said. I won't marry him if you kill me," quavered a weak, but angry voice.

Lane Hatcher stood at the head of the stairs in her coarse, woollen nightdress. The bandage on her head was no whiter than her face, but her black eyes gleamed angrily and unafraid.

"Lane!" Floss cried in distress. "I thought mother was watching you?"

"She got tired an' went out, so I come out here to see what all this chatterin' an' quarrellin' was about. An' I reckon I found out a-plenty," she finished grimly.

"Well, you don't have to marry him, if you don't want to. You can tell how he shot yuh an' your story'll sure convict him proper. We'll git that much revenge fer his cussed meddlin'," Hunt declared.

"I'll not," Lane declared hotly. "If you have him arrested, I'll swear it was you that shot me."

By this time Floss was at the head of the stairs,

and was trying gently but forcibly to get Lane back in her bed. Hunt was following sulkily.

"I mean it, Hunt," Lane asserted as Floss got her into her bedroom, and closed the door.

Hunt turned around and strode outside, his momentary confusion soon forgotten. After all, he reflected, things had broken very well with him. His father and George were dead, so he need not worry any more about the fake money digging. Dave only was left, and he could easily handle Dave. As soon as he was married to Floss he could do what he wanted with this Ormond fellow. Just then he saw the dairyman, Clark, and his wife, driving up.

"Though we'd drive over early an' see what help ye needed to-day," Clark said.

"Well, Lane's able to be up an' around so we won't need your wife, an' she can drive your team home," Hunt said. "But I'd like to have you go to Dundee for me. You see the old man an' George had the bad judgment to go down there an' git killed off, an' as I can't leave here I'd like to have you go down there an' bring the bodies back, an' a preacher—for the funeral."

"Why, sure; I'd do that much for a neighbour any time," Clark said, his eyes bulging with astonishment. "How'd it all happen?"

"They can tell you more about it down there than I can," Hunt said crisply. "The main thing is to hurry."

"Why, sure." Clark jumped. Young as he was, Hunt Hatcher had a way of making men obey him.

Before Clark got away, however, Floss contrived to interview him very briefly.

"My father is in jail in Dundee," she said. "Tell him that I know everything, and that he's not to worry. Also, bring back the mail. You had just as well bring the sack to me here, for I can't be at the post office for a while."

That day and the next were dreary ones for Floss. She was denied the poor consolation of offering Lane her sympathy, for the girl would have none of it. Yet Lane was strangely subdued since learning the truth of how she had misconstrued Ormond's attempted philanthropy. What she had not overheard, she compelled Floss to tell her, and accepted the humiliating truth without undue bitterness.

"I reckon I'm a heap better off'n you are at that, if you insist on marryin' Hunt," Lane repeated several times. But try as she would, she could get no explanation from Floss why she intended doing so; nor could she argue her out of it.

About noon the third day after the killing, Clark arrived with the bodies of the two Hatchers, and the minister who had been there a few days before was with him.

While Hunt and the preacher made arrangements for the simple funeral, and the wedding, Floss sorted over the few letters which were in the mail sack Clark had brought. She was only doing it to kill time, and to get a momentary release from the painful thoughts that were making life dreary for her. Suddenly a spark of interest was aroused as

she came upon a letter addressed to Joe Ormond. There was no return address on it, but the postmark was from Salt Lake City. She had no doubt that it was from the detective agency people.

This recalled to her mind that Ormond was really a detective, or she firmly believed that he was. She remembered now that he had told her that he was following a bunch of her father's cattle when she had encountered him at the falls. The later developments had caused her to forget that, but now she wondered if there was not a lot of significance to it. Suddenly she thrust the letter into the bosom of her dress, and hurried to find Hunt Hatcher.

"I must see Mr. Ormond before this—this—marriage," she told him firmly.

Hunt regarded her with a curious, speculative eye.

"I dunno," he said deliberately. "I figgered on lettin' him out to watch the ceremony, but I dunno's I want to let you talk to him before—an' after we're married I absolutely forbid it."

"If you don't let me talk to him before, and alone, I won't marry you, now or ever," she declared.

"All right," Hunt conceded. "I'll take ye to him, but remember that I'll be close at hand, so don't try any funny business."

"Don't think that every one is as contemptible as you are," she said scornfully.

With small grace Hunt led her around several cabins which had once housed as notorious a gang of outlaws as ever drew breath. In one of them they

found Dave Hatcher with a rifle on his knee. Hunt let down a heavy bar at the back of the room, and went down three steps into an inner room ; the girl close at his heels. It was a dark, cheerless room ; totally devoid of furniture except for a block of wood for a table, and another for a chair, and a bunk along one side. The one little window was heavily barred with pieces of heavy, steel wagon tyres.

Ormond was sitting on one of the blocks when they came in.

" I just brought my intended wife in to see yuh for a few minutes, Ormond," Hunt stated. " We're to be married in an hour, an' you can come to the weddin' if ye want to. After that you can leave Hatcher's Shebang if yuh want, if you promise never to come back." He withdrew, and they heard the bar being slammed across the door.

Ormond seized the girl's hands. " My God, Floss, that isn't true, is it—what he just said ? "

She tried to withdraw her hands. " I'm afraid it is," she said, at last giving up the effort to free herself. " I made him let me see you to tell you that Lane knows everything now, and you won't have to marry some one you don't want to—and to give you this letter."

The real object of her visit she did not mention.

He took the letter from her, gazed at it indifferently ; then started to put it in his pocket.

" Read it—" she commanded.

"Why?" he asked. "Right now there are other things more important."

"Not for me, perhaps," she said.

"Why?" he asked again.

"The letter to which this one is the answer told me that you were a detective. I want to know just how much you've learned."

"Why, girl, I'm no regular detective," he gasped. Then he thought he comprehended what she wanted. She hoped that he had got evidence against the Hatchers, so that Hunt's mysterious hold over her could be broken. A bitter consciousness of failure swept over him. More to gain time to collect himself than anything else, he tore open the envelope and read the letter. There was also a newspaper clipping enclosed, and a postscript casually alluded to it. He read both letter and clipping eagerly. When he finished his hand was trembling. He folded them separately, and put them carefully back in the envelope. He glanced at the girl pityingly, and took her lightly by the shoulders, compelling her by his will to meet his gaze.

"Why are you going to marry Hunt Hatcher?" he demanded.

"You," she said in a low voice, "were going to marry Lane Hatcher out of what you thought was a sense of duty. My motive is the same."

Suddenly he drew her gently to him. She resisted for a moment, then yielded abruptly and clasped him wildly around the neck. The next moment the tears came. With his face buried in her bright,

golden hair he waited for the outburst to pass
At last she looked up and tried to disengage herself

"Let me go now," she pleaded. "I've got to do
this. There are things you don't understand."

"And there are things I do understand, Floss,"
he said, holding her firmly. "You must not do
this thing—even for a father."

She jumped nervously, and glanced into his face
with frightened eyes.

"What do you know?" she faltered.

"I know that your father is a thief; that Hun
Hatcher knows it; and that you are trying to
protect him," he said gently.

CHAPTER XX

LIKE A TRAPPED WOLF

FOR a moment after Ormond had spoken the room seemed to whirl round and round for Floss. She had come here hoping to find out if he really knew of her father's crookedness—and to persuade him to keep quiet if he did. In spite of this it had come as a shock to know that he really knew.

"Then you are a detective, after all," she managed to say.

"Before I answer that question you must tell me just what hold Hunt Hatcher has over you," he insisted.

"I can't—unless I know what you know."

"And if I don't know enough to spike your game you'll go ahead and sacrifice yourself, anyway," he guessed.

She nodded.

"You are going to tell me everything. I won't be satisfied with anything less," he said masterfully.

"But I'll tell you this: I know enough to send your father to the penitentiary."

"But you mustn't," she pleaded, grasping him by the lapels of his coat. "There are things you don't understand, because they have happened since you've been in here. My father killed Bim and

George Hatcher. Unless this other business comes out, he'll be acquitted on the grounds of self-defence ; but if it's known that it is he, instead of the Hatchers, who has been rustling stock for so many years they'll certainly hang him."

For a moment this new phase of the question dazed Ormond.

" That certainly adds a complication," he admitted presently, " but your father is no better than other men—he must pay the penalty of his own actions. Now tell me the rest of this business. Were all those cattle which your father claimed to have bought or leased, stolen ? "

" Hunt says they were," she said wearily. " It seems that my father used the reputation of the Hatchers to cover up his own crookedness. He would go away down in the valleys and buy a few cattle and steal a great many more. Doubtless he has partners down there too. If people ever suspected that the stolen cattle were driven up here, they never thought to look through our cattle, because of father's well known fear and hatred of the Hatchers. Hunt found out long ago about it, but his father made him keep still. He's got a paper, however, with a list of stolen cattle advertised for and—and he showed me those cattle. They are some that my dad claims to have bought."

Gradually things were beginning to clear up ; though there were still some things not easily understandable. Ormond voiced some of them.

" There is some secret connection, or was, between

your father and Bim Hatcher. It had something to do with some buried money. Do you know anything about it?"

"I never heard a thing about it," she said. "I don't know why," she wondered in her turn, "he hired you."

"Here is the reason he wanted me to stay in the first place," he said, handing her the letter she had given him.

She read it eagerly.

"MY DEAR JOE,—Delighted to do you a favour. You'll be tickled to know that we have had amazing good luck with your case. One of our men out on another case found your horses in possession of an itinerate horse trader who deals mostly in rustled stock. He was tickled to death to tell how he came by them. Admitted that he had got them from a man by the name of Bill Woodlaw up at Dundee. We are holding the horses here for your further orders. Is there anything else you want us to do?

"Best regards,

"GALT.

"P.S.—Here is a clipping that may interest you."

"Oh, this is humiliating," the girl cried. "He hired you merely to keep you on the ranch until he could get rid of the horses."

Ormond knew also that Woodlaw had been keen to send him to Hatchers to get his saddle in order that he might get killed. But of this he said nothing.

Further he saw that the horse shoes had been "planted" at Hatchers' by Woodlaw or his men.

"I imagine it's a disease which grew on your father," he said slowly. "In some way he got a hold on the Hatchers to use them as a blanket, and as he grew more successful he grew more ambitious. That is why he finally decided to use the open range."

"If they had found the stolen cattle on the open range, under your care——" She stopped hesitantly.

"Doubtless I would have been fool enough to have fought them off as long as I could," he evaded. Yet both were aware of Woodlaw's intentions if such an eventuality had taken place.

"Maybe we'll never know what his motives are; but I can't let him hang," Floss said loyally.

"And I won't permit you to sacrifice yourself for him," Ormond asserted with equal firmness.

"I rather think you can't help yourself, Joe," she said, a faint outline of a smile breaking the drawn tenseness of her face for a moment. "Remember that you're a prisoner, and that I shall be married before you get out."

"But after I'm out, I'll tell all I know," he said.

"You're bluffing," she declared positively. "You won't add to my troubles needlessly after I've married Hunt."

He saw the helplessness of his position, and thought desperately for some argument to convince the girl of her foolishness.

"Somebody else will surely find out what your father is doing. They'll either find the stolen cattle,

or Galt will convict him for stealing my horses," he submitted.

" You remember Mr. Galt said he was waiting for further orders from you. And from the way Frazier acted I know that he and the other men are getting the cattle away until this murder trial is over."

" They're all in with your father ? "

" I think so."

Suddenly Ormond remembered the strange, humped figure he had met that first night just before he reached Hatcher's Shebang, and he recalled that he bore a striking resemblance to Sam Brice. Brice, then, must have been the actual thief—but that did not help matters.

" Your father is a criminal, Floss," he said soberly. " We had just as well face the facts. He is no better to escape punishment than any other man. If you persist in what you are planning, I'll lodge all the information in my possession against him the moment I get out of here. So you'll gain nothing."

" If you do, I'll hate you," she said hotly.

He bowed. " I'll be very sorry ; but I can't help it."

She looked into his eyes imploringly, and read there a confirmation of his rigid purpose.

" One word from me, and Hunt will kill——"

He smiled.

" You'll not say that word," he said confidently.

Suddenly she knocked on the door. It was opened instantly and Hunt Hatcher loomed in the doorway.

Behind him, rifle at the ready, stood his brother Dave. A wild impulse to make a desperate struggle for freedom assailed Ormond, but quickly passed as he realised its utter futility, and the added danger to the girl.

"Had a good visit?" Hunt asked maliciously, but with a note of disappointment which Ormond interpreted as chagrin that the thick walls and door had foiled his attempts to overhear them.

"Fine," Joe said quickly. "Now that you've been good enough to let Floss come in here and explain matters, I hope you'll let me come to the wedding."

Hunt started a gloating, triumphant grin, but it froze on his face when Floss cried desperately, "You mustn't! You mustn't let him out until—afterward."

"Then I sure won't," Hunt said shortly. The door slammed, and Ormond was left alone.

What could he do? For hours he had gone over his prison walls inch by inch, but the place had been built with no other thought than to keep men in—and it fulfilled its grim purpose.

Would Floss do as she had threatened, and marry Hunt Hatcher? It seemed incredible, but there was an unmistakable strain of obstinacy in the girl's nature, and he knew that she would go through with it on the slim chance that he would not carry out his threat.

Whether she married Hunt or not, he was determined not to give up the fight until he was absolutely

beaten—depending, of course, on whether he was ever to get out of his prison.

Like a trapped wolf he tramped up and down the narrow room, wracking his brain for some way to escape ; or some other way out of the difficulty ; but there was none. In an hour, Hunt had said, they would be married—and the minutes were crowding by on winged feet, as though anxious to pass into eternity.

CHAPTER XXI

LANE'S SUPREME EFFORT

ORMOND at last looked at his watch ; though he had wistfully refrained from doing so, dreading the certain knowledge that the hour had passed. It told him that the time was indeed up, and he sank down on one of the blocks, and buried his face in his hands. The minutes, once so anxious to go, now dragged by indolently.

Suddenly he heard some one fumbling at the door of his prison. He leaped to his feet, and crouched beside the door. He would take no chances on Hunt's promise to liberate him. Desperate as the chance might be to fight his way unarmed to freedom, he determined to take it. But as he crouched there expectantly he noticed that there was something about the sound of this fumbling at the door that told him that it was neither Hunt nor Dave. Breathlessly he waited until the bar dropped to the floor, and the door swung open.

In the gloom his eyes had become unused to the light ; now he could see nothing but a blur of white in the doorway.

" Quick," whispered a voice. " They'll miss me in a minute. You must git away."

" Lane," he breathed, " is it you ? "

"Yes. They left me alone in bed while they had the funeral, an' I slipped out to turn you loose. Hurry—I'm—about—all in."

Even as she spoke the girl was falling. Ormond caught her in his arms, and saw that she had fainted. He lifted her gently and rushed outside. He could hear a droning voice from somewhere on the other side of the ranch house, and this he judged to be the preacher making his remarks over the two dead Hatchers. With the girl in his arms he rushed toward the house and gained the door that opened to the stairway without being observed. He climbed the stairs rather blindly. Fortunately Lane had left her door open, and by the bottles and bandages lying about he recognised that it was her room. He laid her on the bed, and leaped to the window.

Looking out cautiously through the coarse window blind he saw the two coffins. The minister stood on one side of them, facing the house, and he was speaking. On this side, also, stood Dave and Hunt Hatcher. On the other side Floss, her mother, and the Clarks. With such a small audience it was a certainty that the preacher would not hold forth long.

Ormond turned to Lane and placed a cold, wet cloth on her forehead. Presently she opened her eyes. She smiled, and then it gave way to a look of pain. Ormond felt himself warming to the girl as he had never done before.

"Git out o' here," she whispered. "You'll

prob'ly find your gun in the front room downstairs—if yuh can git there without bein' seen. But you'd better make tracks."

"Lane," he said earnestly, "I want you to know that I didn't shoot you. I would have kept my bargain—will yet. And I know that you'll be a lot too good for me."

"I know," she said without opening her eyes.
"I was an awful fool. But you must marry Floss."

"Then she has decided not to—" He could not keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"No. She an' the preacher wouldn't stand fer the marryin' before the funeral, but it's to be pulled off immediately after, an' before the buryin' so's the preacher can git home to-night."

Ormond stepped to the window again. The minister had finished his sermon, and was fingering his hymn book. He must prevent this shameful sacrifice at all hazards, and he had only minutes in which to do it.

"Good-bye, Lane," he said; "I'm on my way." He left the room, and the girl raised herself on her elbow and watched him go.

"I don't care if he does git killed," she sobbed. Then added, "Gee, but I'm glad I could give him a chance to fight for his woman."

Ormond ran hastily down the stairway and into what he judged was the front room. Like most mountain men the Hatchers were gun lovers, and several rifles and shot guns hung on antlers upon the wall. But the thing he wanted most, his six

shooter, was not in evidence. There was an old-fashioned desk in the room, and he thought that the gun might possibly be in a drawer. It was under a window on the opposite side of the room from him, and he started for it. But the moment he stepped in sight a shrill scream echoed through the room. Framed in the outer doorway was Mrs. Woodlaw. The funeral had proved too much for her fragile nerves, and she was on her way indoors when, seeing a man in the house, she had characteristically screamed first and investigated afterward.

Ormond crossed the room at a bound, and wrenched open the top drawer in the desk. Lying among a miscellaneous mass of papers was his gun. No friend could have been more welcome. The familiar feel of the gun handle as it cuddled in his palm sent a wave of supreme confidence surging through him. He felt equal to anything.

But he had no time to spare. The same moment his fingers clutched his weapon, he saw Hunt Hatcher enter the room, gun in hand, poised ready for a shot.

Ormond's gun came up to the top of the desk with the speed of light. At the same moment he ducked his head, and fired by instinct alone. The two shots came as one, and Hunt's bullet slivered the top of the desk on its way to the mark. Ormond felt something hot sear the top of his shoulder.

Ormond's bullet had also scratched Hunt somewhere as was evidenced by the furious curse which Hunt let go. With the supple springiness of a cat

Ormond bounded to the centre of the room, and met Hunt face to face, and almost breast to breast. He had no thought of self-defence ; thus giving the lie to the saying that self-preservation is always the first law in times of stress. In Hunt's malevolent, leering face he saw not his own would-be destroyer, but the potential husband of Floss Woodlaw, and he had the moral courage to try to kill him to prevent the consummation of Hunt's rotten schemes.

He knew that Hunt had just a fraction the advantage, and that the slightest refusal of a muscle to co-ordinate—the least involuntary flinching from the prospect of death meant defeat. But there was no faltering. For a moment body and mind became a perfectly functioning machine, existing for one purpose alone. It seemed to him that his years of practice with a revolver had been ordained for this one encounter. His confidence was supreme, and he was smiling.

That smile caused Hunt a moment of involuntary weakness. For the length of time it takes an eye to close, fear gripped him. This time the concussion of one gun was at its climax, as the other began. Ormond felt the heat and wind of the bullet as it sped past his cheek, and crashed into the log wall behind him. But Hunt Hatcher pitched forward on his face—his conniving, conspiring career forever at an end.

But Joe's danger was not over. Like the weird result of some conjurer's trick, the moment Hunt

Hatcher's leering, evil face disappeared, its place was taken by the dull, but determined features of his brother Dave.

Ormond's quarrel had never been with this man. Justified as he felt in killing Hunt, he yet experienced a feeling of nausea that made the idea of killing this other man repugnant. He slid his gun back in its holster as his feet left the ground. The next moment he had landed on Dave, and the two plunged to the ground almost under the coffins.

Dave was totally unprepared for this move. Before he knew what was really happening, his gun was wrenched from him and tossed away. His other one he could not get at. It was now skill against strength as they struggled silently. Mingled with their heavy breathing was the alarmed cries of Mrs. Woodlaw and Mrs. Clark, and the impotent, half-hysterical pleadings and commands of the minister.

Dave's lack of skill speedily resulted in his being flat on his back, helpless and discouraged.

"I believe you'd better give up," Ormond said, breathing hard.

"You've got me," Dave admitted sulkily.

The last of the male Hatchers stood up and glanced around. His father and two brothers lay dead before his eyes, and he was by far the least assertive one of the bunch. Without their minds to guide him Dave was crushed.

Ormond straightened up and gazed around, his eyes searching for Floss Woodlaw. Perhaps he

uld not be blamed for expecting a measure of
atitude for having saved her from the doom that
d threatened. But when he found her she was
eeling by Hunt Hatcher, and her eyes were filled
th horror as they met his gaze.

Without a word, or a backward glance, he walked
the corrals, found a horse and saddle and rode
ray.

CHAPTER XXII

ORMOND IS ACCUSED

THREE days passed. Bim Hatcher and his two boys were buried. The Clarks had gone home. Mrs. Woodlaw had gone to Dundee to comfort her husband, taking the Chinese cook with her. Floss Woodlaw remained at Hatcher's Shebang with Lane and Dave. Lane's wound had improved rapidly, so that she was able to sit up most of the time, while Dave wandered around like a man in a dream. Suddenly deprived of the stronger characters who had ordered his life for him, he was completely lost.

Then a visitor came to Hatcher's shebang. It was Mark Brown, the cheese-maker. His face was grim and haggard and there was evidence of weariness in the way he held his body. First he had a talk with Dave Hatcher in the corrals, and then he sought an interview with Lane.

The girls were in the kitchen when he came to the house.

"Why, Mark, where have you been all this time?" was Lane's surprised greeting.

"I've been away doing some hard ridin'," he said. "I just got back to Dundee yesterday an' heard about this—this trouble for the first time."

Believe me, I got a shock when I heard you'd been shot. I come right on up as fast as I could ride."

"Oh, me, I just got a scratch. Where have you been that's so important?" Lane asked curiously.

"I've been out investigatin' somethin' that concerns you mighty close," he said, a blush covering his homely face. "If I could see you alone—"

"I'll be glad to go," Floss said, starting to leave the room.

"Don't," Lane insisted imperiously. "Me an' Floss ain't got no secrets any more."

"It's about a certain man that I want to talk to you," Mark stated, again colouring furiously. It was a delicate subject, and he felt that it would be bad enough to discuss it with Lane alone.

Floss's intuition told her who this man was, and though she wanted desperately to know all about him, she started determinedly toward the door.

"I know—it's about Joe Ormond," Lane broke in. "You see," she said, addressing Floss, "I told Mark I was stuck on Joe the first time I ever saw him. So no matter what Mark's got to say about him, good or bad, I want you to listen."

Painfully aware that she did not know whether she was doing the right thing or not, Floss sank into a chair.

"I wasn't kickin' about yer choice," Mark said with a flaming face. "I just wanted to be sure that you wasn't makin' no mistake. Dave has told me that you was goin' to marry him, an' that he shot

you to git out of it. Mebbe I don't need to tell no more—but girls are plumb foolish some ways, an' I was afraid you'd still be gone on him."

"Spit it out," Lane cried impatiently. "He never shot me."

"Who did?" Mark demanded.

"I don't know—they never give me time to see. What about Joe Or——?"

"Lane, are ye sure that this feller wanted to marry you?" the cheese-maker interrupted.

"I'm quite sure he didn't—it was something else entirely he wanted to do," Lane said.

A wave of anger swept over Brown's ugly face. "If I git my hands on him," he choked. "Well, anyway," he went on more calmly, "I'm glad I went to the trouble to look up a part of his record, anyway."

"You—what?" Floss demanded, springing to her feet.

"I looked him up. Trailed him back to the place he worked before he come here, and I learned that he sneaked in here like a thief, avoiding towns an' people. An' there he went by the name of Joe Arthur."

"Then—'Ormond' was—an alias," Floss said slowly.

"Lord knows what his real name is, but anybody that goes under an assumed name can't be trusted," Brown declared.

"Bosh!" Lane Hatcher objected. "You can't tell till you know what his reason is."

"That don't help his case none," Brown answered, "for they learned after he left that he's wanted in New Mexico for robbin' a bank."

Floss arose and quietly made her way out of the room. Her feelings should have been easy to analyse, but on the contrary they were strangely mixed.

"Lane," Mark Brown said tenderly, "why don't you come back to me?"

"If you want me to even think about marryin' you—which I ain't goin' to do for some years yet, anyway—you've got to apologise to Floss for what you just said about Joe Ormond."

"Why—what——?" he wondered incredulously.

"Because she loves him, an' you hurt her feelin's. He's a real man no matter what they say. You think he tried to kill me, but I know he didn't. He only wanted to send me to school, an' I was fool enough to think he wanted to marry me. Rather than let me git the bump I had comin' to me, he was ready to go through with it—an' him crazy about Floss all the time."

Lane's black eyes were flashing, and the words rolled and tumbled in her animation.

"Now you're the same wildcat girl o' the mountains," Mark declared, with a pleased grin. "But that story is too thin. You can bet Floss won't have any more to do with him."

"Then she's mighty soft," Lane declared hotly. "Do you think I'd let a little thing like that——?"

"Now this sendin' you to school," Mark broke

in. "Why should he, a perfect stranger, spend all that money on you—even if it was stolen money—unless——"

"Because he is all man, an' not afraid for a few measley dollars," she cut in.

The cheese-maker flushed. "I'll do as much as he would. I'll send you to school as long as you want to go."

"Don't worry," she laughed. "I ain't takin' help from no man—never no more. When this place is sold, if my share won't send me to school I'll go without schoolin'."

Brown arose lugubriously. "I guess you're right," he admitted. "You don't think enough of me to marry me for a while yet, but my offer to help still stands." Then, because he was a just man, he added, "Ormond may possibly be able to explain all them things. Mistakes do happen. But don't let Floss or yourself git carried away with him till he explains why he come in here like a sneak, an' under a false name."

Then he went out.

Ormond's perfidy did not loom nearly as large in Lane's simple mind as it did in Floss's rigid code of things as they ought to be. Granting it all to be true, she was yet willing to stick by him with all the force of her loyal little soul—and she had renounced her own hopes absolutely. She was big enough to let Floss have him, and more; she was anxious to adjust the differences between them. This news that Mark Brown had brought was too much for

her to cope with, but she felt that this other matter could be solved, if only she could remember. Time and again she wracked her brain in an attempt to remember what had happened just before she had been shot. And then, like a flash from some suddenly uncoiled part of her memory she remembered her father's angry voice just before things ceased to be. A grim smile settled on her face.

She and Floss were in the kitchen together when Dave Hatcher came in for his dinner.

"Dave," Lane said coolly, "you were with dad when I got shot, an' you seen who done it. Let's have the straight of it."

Dave gave a start, and backing against a wall defensively, began to relate the wearisome story that had been drilled into him by his father and Hunt. His sister cut him short.

"You was all right there! Which one o' you shot me?"

Too long Dave had been a creature of other men's wills. Against his fiery, self-willed sister he had no chance.

"It was pap," he admitted reluctantly.

Meantime, Ormond had been busy. After leaving Hatcher's Shebang he had ridden to the Woodlaw ranch, and spent the night. The next forenoon he discovered that practically all the cattle that Woodlaw had had possession of were gone. Only those to which Woodlaw apparently had a good title remained. That the rustled cattle had been driven

away by Woodlaw's men and by his orders seemed practically certain.

Though they had a good start, he was able to take the trail and follow it, and the next day he came in sight of them. Always the problem before him was: should he tell the truth about Bill Woodlaw? Now that Hunt Hatcher was dead, there was no longer any menace to Floss except the one of disgrace which he held over her. He was not an officer of the law. All he had to do was to keep quiet about the stolen cattle. Woodlaw would be acquitted of the murder charge, and could return to his old tricks with no one the wiser except Floss and Ormond.

But every instinct revolted against permitting Woodlaw to continue playing his crooked game. He could do it only at the price of his self-respect. He let the rustlers go, and rode toward Dundee.

As he rode through the little mountain valleys on his way to town he found the answer to his problem. Every little while he passed a small ranch. Every one was obviously of the pioneer type, and every one told in signs of grievous deprivations of the heart-breaking struggle for existence and independence waged by these people in their effort to get started in the cattle business. It was upon people such as these that Woodlaw had carried on his depredations.

His first act, therefore, upon reaching Dundee was to hunt up the sheriff of the county, and inform him where to intercept the stolen cattle. There was

not a chance, he knew, that all of Woodlaw's three men would keep quiet. One of them at least, possibly all of them, would try to shunt the blame on Woodlaw.

Not until he had taken this definite step did he inquire for Woodlaw.

"He's out on bail. You couldn't keep a good man like Bill Woodlaw in jail fer killin' a thing like old Bim Hatcher," the sheriff said.

Ormond smiled grimly at this mute evidence of how well Woodlaw had succeeded in making Hatcher a cloak for his thieving. He said no more, and refused to be a member of the sheriff's posse—not through fear, but because he had other work to do.

He had to go back to Cache Basin. He told himself that it was to return the horse he was riding. But deep down in his heart he knew there was another reason. He had to stand before Floss Woodlaw without pretence or equivocation—exactly as he was.

CHAPTER XXIII

A LONG SCORE IS PAID

BILL WOODLAW had found his ranch in Cache Basin entirely deserted when he arrived there. Yet, as he knew the exact whereabouts of every man belonging there, except his new man, Ormond, who didn't count, he had no cause to worry. His wife had told him that Floss was staying with Lane Hatcher, and now that three of the Hatchers were gone, and those three the most formidable, he had no hesitation in going to the Shebang for his daughter.

He dismounted, tied his horse to the old, rotten stockade fence, and walked slowly inside; yet keeping a wary look out for Davie Hatcher. He was half-way to the house when Floss saw him. She breathlessly ran forward to meet him, a look of eagerness in her face. Not until she was within ten feet of him did she notice his expression. Then she stopped while something akin to dismay crossed her face. He was smiling jovially as usual—almost jubilantly it seemed to his daughter.

She had expected to see something of remorse in him; not remembering that he was unaware that his crookedness had been found out.

Woodlaw held out his arms to the girl eagerly,

and a look of astonishment passed over him when she did not leap into them as was her habit.

"What's the matter, little one? You don't need to worry. Everything is O.K. I'm out on bail, an' my trial won't amount to anything—just a mere matter of form. In no time we'll all be back on the ranch just like nothin' had ever happened."

"Not just the same, father," she said. It was the first time she had ever used the formal title.

"Why, you ain't fussy about me killin' them fellers in self-defence, are you, girl?" he demanded, with what she thought was a touch of cruelty in his voice. She seemed to be seeing her father for the first time—seeing beyond his mask of joviality.

"Not so much about that as because you have been a thief—and a—liar," she blurted. It was not in the least the thing she had meant to say; nor the kind of greeting she had meant to give him; but it was torn out of her by something stronger than her every day self.

Bill Woodlaw's face went gray, then red.

"What foolishness is this?" he demanded, seizing her by the shoulder.

"Don't bluff, father," she said quietly. "Hunt Hatcher found out about your crookedness long ago, but he kept it to himself to force me to marry him. I would have done it, too, to protect you—but I'm glad now I didn't."

Woodlaw was a consummate actor at times, and he was always a quick thinker. He knew that

Hunt was dead, and that Brice had got the stolen cattle away.

"He was lyin'," he said easily. "It was just a Hatcher trick to land you. I'll eat my hat if anybody can find a stolen critter on my place."

"I know—Brice and the rest have taken them away. I don't suppose you could be convicted for that now—but you are a crook just the same," she said dully.

Again the anger crept into Woodlaw's voice. "Don't crowd me too hard," he warned.

"But you can be convicted for stealing Joe Ormond's two horses. He hired a detective agency to trace them, and they've been traced back to you. You can't get away from that," she said.

Woodlaw seemed to fairly wilt. All his bluster slipped from him like a discarded garment. "Is—is that right?" he whispered.

"It is."

"Where is he?" Woodlaw asked, a wolfish guilt in his eye.

"He left here, I think, to tell the authorities. He also knows about your rustling."

"Tell me what you know," Woodlaw said humbly, leading the way back to where he had left his horse.

Floss followed, and while he leaned against his horse, with his face buried in its mane, she told him all she knew, holding nothing back.

"An' you thought enough of me to marry a man you hated, an' all the time you was in love with this here Ormond!" he commented.

"I did," she said evenly. "I may as well tell you too, that this man Ormond is not what I thought he was. He is a bank robber and his real name is not Ormond. Before he came here he was called Joe Arthur."

"A damned alias, huh?" Woodlaw said. "Any man that will sail—"

"Just the same he happens to hold your destiny in his hands," the girl reminded.

"I wish I had him here," Woodlaw said furiously. Then he became buried in thought for several minutes. When he looked up again a look of hope had taken the place of despair.

"You say this—this jail-bird—is in love with you?"

"I'm quite sure of it," she replied, low voiced.

"Then drive a bargain with him. Marry him, if he'll agree to keep his mouth shut. You was willin' to marry a man you hated—it can't hurt to marry the one you really wanted," he argued.

"You are pretty rotten, aren't you?" The fingers which gripped a pole until the blood was forced out of them betrayed her intense feeling.

"Will you do it?" he asked doggedly.

"Yes—if he'll take me on such a bargain. Which he won't."

"You make him," Woodlaw cried desperately. "Don't you see that if he hollers it'll turn public feelin' against me, an' they'll hang me for shootin' the Hatchers—they'll be martyrs."

"I'm afraid so," she said after some deliberation.

"I'll do my best for you. But first we've got to find him."

"He'll come," Woodlaw declared confidently. "He don't think he'll be found here, an' he'll come back. We dassn't threaten him, but after you're married you kin git a divorce."

"Father, tell me how you came to get mixed up in such business," the girl ordered suddenly, striving to conceal the loathing in her voice.

"It was Bim Hatcher that got me in bad," he began, but the girl cut him short.

"Don't lie to me again, father—ever. I can tell when you're telling the truth."

"Well, I was straight enough till I met Bim Hatcher," he insisted. "Years ago I was sent in here as a deputy sheriff to finish cleanin' up the old Bunton gang. This place was called Cache Shebang then. Most of the gang had been wiped out by the vigilantes, but on my way in I caught one o' the gang named 'Curley Jake.' I arrested him, an' he told me he'd tell me where there was a lot of Bunton's money buried, if I'd let him go. I struck a bargain with him.

"What he told me was that just two of the gang had escaped from the vigilantes—him an' a fool southerner named Bim Hatcher. They had gone back to the Shebang to look for this money. Curley Jake knew where it was, but Bim didn't. Knowin' he couldn't git away with it from Bim, he pretended to have forgot where it was, an' pulled out. Figgerin' of course to go back an' git it after Bim left.

" Well, I slipped in in the night, an' dug up the money—about five thousand dollars was all there was. Then I hunted up Bim Hatcher, an' had a talk with him. Instead of arrestin' him I made a deal with him too. I told him I had Curley Jake's confession, an' could nail him as a member o' the gang if I wanted to, but I'd let him go if he'd keep his mouth shut an' give me a free hand in the basin. He wanted that buried money most awful bad—thought there was a lot more of it than there was—an' he give in. But he had a temper, an' he threatened to kill me if I ever come on his place for that money.

" With that five thousand dollars I started in business, an' I done fairly well by keepin' everybody watchin' old Bim. An' he growed old an' gray, an' raised a family lookin' for that money that I'd got years ago."

There was no sign of remorse or pity in his manner as he finished his explanation ; rather, there was a sort of sardonic enjoyment of the plight in which he had put Bim Hatcher.

" My big mistake was in gettin' too ambitious," he said. " I figgered on gittin' all I could this summer by usin' the outside range, an' then hair-brandin' the whole outfit this fall, an' quittin' the country for good.

" But all that's past," he said after a moment, seeing that Floss did not speak. " If you git me out of this I'll promise you to live straight." He gazed anxiously at his daughter, unmindful of the

pain and humiliation in her face, and thinking only of his own chances to escape the penalty of his crimes.

Still she did not speak.

"This shootin' scrape had almost killed your mother. If this other comes out, she'll never live through it," he declared.

"I know it," she said dully. "You go and find Or—Ormond, if you can, and tell him I want to see him. Don't tell him that I know what he is. I'll make the bargain if I can."

Woodlaw leaped upon his horse. His plight was desperate, he knew, and this was his one chance out. Though he claimed to hate a fugitive from justice he was glad now that he had one to deal with, for he was sure that Ormond would be holding off purposely to drive a hard bargain. With Floss as the price he was sure everything could be arranged.

In the narrowest part of Bunton's Pass, just where the road made a sharp curve, he came face to face with the man he was seeking.

Woodlaw should have been satisfied to tell Ormond just what his daughter had said to tell him and let it go at that. But, judging his man from his own sordid motives, he thought to influence him.

"Hallo, Ormond," he greeted jovially. "You're just the man I was lookin' for."

"Is that so?"

"My girl sent for you. Said you must be sure to

come. She's got somethin' important to say to you. I reckon you can guess what it is."

"To tell the truth I can't," Ormond said.

"She's willin' to marry you—if you'll keep still about what you know," Woodlaw said bluntly. "An' we'll keep still about your name bein' Joe Arthur—an' the rest."

"It's too late to make that kind of a bargain—even if I would permit it," Ormond said coolly. "I've made it impossible for your daughter to sacrifice herself for you to any man. By this time Brice, Frazier and Randall will be under arrest, and the stolen cattle will be in the hands of the sheriff. You know best whether any of them will turn state's evidence."

Woodlaw's face went livid.

"You dirty, rotten crook, you; you've give me away," he snarled. His hand flashed to his hip, and came up with the practised flip of the finished gunman. Ormond knew now, what he had suspected since hearing how Woodlaw had killed Bim and George Hatcher, that this man was not the helpless creature he had pretended to be. Life or death hung upon the merest fraction of time; yet there were problems which had to be threshed out before he could decide which to do—kill the father of the girl he loved, or commit suicide. Even as his gun was coming up with the smooth snap acquired by years of practice, thought, and natural ability, he was probing his mind in a way that it had never been probed before. He had the will power to stay

the finger that caressed the trigger, until it would have been for ever too late to change his mind if that would have helped Floss solve the problem of her life. But Bill Woodlaw was too black to be of service to any one. He was utterly unworthy to live. Yet, despite all this, Ormond knew that he could not kill this man, providing he was fast enough with a gun to do so. Some innate delicacy of feeling held him back.

Bill Woodlaw was a two-gunner, and he paid the inevitable penalty of the habit. The man with one gun is capable of greater speed and greater concentration than the man trying to lug out two, and Ormond had never been so swift on the draw in his life. Though Woodlaw could not know it, his antagonist had decided to risk everything on one monumental bluff.

"Drop those guns," Ormond said crisply.

Woodlaw's guns were clear of the holsters—a flip of the wrist, and they would be in a position to send two streams of lead into the man in front of him. But a round, black hole that was the muzzle of Ormond's forty-four, was pointed at a spot directly in the middle of his forehead. Ormond's face was calm, cold and confident. Woodlaw wavered; panic seized him and his guns clattered to the ground.

Ormond swung to the ground, and picked them up.

"You lost your one big chance, Woodlaw, when you didn't shoot," Ormond said, smiling grimly.

" Much as you need killing, I couldn't have shot you, because you are Floss's father."

" Then what are you going to do ? " Woodlaw demanded.

" Let me see," Ormond mused. " The officers will be after you in at least twenty-four hours. You can't go back to Dundee, and you can't stay here. I think I'll take your cartridges, and let you solve your own problem."

He emptied the two six shooters, and then took all the cartridges from Woodlaw's gun belt.

" Here's your guns and your belt," he said. " That will save your face if you happen to meet any one you know. Now you can go."

Woodlaw's face was positively blue in his helpless anger. Most painful of all to him was the realisation that Ormond had been telling the truth when he said that he would not have fired. Woodlaw knew the signs of a killer, and those signs were absent in the man before him. He had let fear conquer him for a moment—and had come to this. Suddenly he whirled his horse, dug the spurs in up to the shanks, and bolted down the road toward Hatcher's Shebang—every nerve and fibre of him seething with the lust to kill.

Ormond watched the rancher ride out of sight ; then he swung on to his own horse, and deliberated a moment. After all, he thought, what further business had he in Cache Basin ? Yet he had not accomplished the thing he had started back to do —which was to explain himself to Floss Woodlaw.

With a dogged set to his jaw he turned his horse, and rode slowly toward Woodlaw's ranch.

Furious as he was, Bill Woodlaw still had presence of mind enough to try to think of some way out of his difficulty. He had very little money with him, no ammunition ; and the way was barred behind him as Ormond had said. Worse, there was now no one to appeal to for help except Floss. He must, he felt, go back to Hatcher's Shebang, try to get her to find some ammunition for him from the Hatcher's ample store, and command her to have nothing to do with this man who had been the means of his undoing. Then he would ride out through the upper pass, old, broken and a fugitive from justice. A mere matter of hours before and things had been breaking smoothly for him. Now this ! He ground his teeth in impotent rage !

In this mood he entered the Hatcher ranch. That morning he had approached the Shebang with considerable circumspection, for he knew that Dave Hatcher was still alive. But one successful entrance had made him careless and, moreover, he had other things to think about than the last of the Hatchers.

Just as he approached the gate through the old stockade, Dave Hatcher rode through it. Dave was like a man lost. The man he had depended upon to guide his destiny was gone. Now, as he came suddenly face to face with the man who had shattered the orderly course of his life—the man he had been taught from infancy to hate—he was filled with a sudden, blind lust to kill. Out came his guns with

all the skill which old Bim Hatcher had been able to teach him.

Woodlaw recognised that look of the killer—he wore it himself. Instinctively, automatically, he went for his guns. A smile of contempt for the other's slowness even wreathed his lips, and then he remembered—his revolvers were empty.

“Wait! Dave, wait!” he gasped. The last word ended in a cough as a bullet struck him in the chest. Straight as a statue he sat while Dave buried bullet after bullet in his body. Suddenly he slumped like a slashed sack of grain, and rolled to the ground—an empty revolver clutched in a death grip in each hand.

The long standing score of the Hatcher tribe was paid.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MATTER OF A NAME

IMMEDIATELY after Bill Woodlaw went to hunt for Ormond to drive the bargain which he thought was to give him liberty, but which, in reality, was to give him death, Floss walked slowly into Hatcher's house. Lane was sitting up, but at sight of Floss's pallid face she arose hastily.

"What's happened, Floss?" she asked anxiously.

"Sit down, dear," Floss urged, kissing the girl gently. "My father has been here, and he told me a few things that shook me up a bit. I think I'll ride over home, if you don't mind, and try to get adjusted to things."

"Don't blame you a bit," Lane declared. Then she went on, "D'ye s'pose there'll be anybody there—Joe Ormond, for instance?"

Floss blushed. "He may be there after a while," she admitted.

"Gee, but I was an awful sucker about him once," Lane said nonchalantly, half as though talking to herself. "I'm sure glad I wised up in time. I'm goin' to git myself an education, an' do big things in the world, an' I don't want no man holdin' me back—or helpin' me along."

"I wish I had your strength," Floss said wistfully.

" And the worst of it is I've robbed you of everything. I haven't had a thing that didn't really belong to you. Even my education should have been yours. But I'm going to make up for it in every way I can."

Then, because she feared she might break down, Floss turned and ran out of the house. She saddled her pony, and was quickly on her way home.

It seemed to her that she could never be happy again. If only she could be like Lane, with nothing to do but fight out her own destiny! She loved Ormond—she no longer made any pretence of doubting it—and she would have given anything to know that he was on his way away from her, and would never return. But something told her that he would come back, and when he did she had pledged herself to what virtually amounted to offering him a bill of sale of herself. She shrank from the ordeal as only a delicate, sensitive, high-strung nature could shrink.

To occupy her mind, she found a broom, and mechanically swept the dusty rooms. But all the time her mind seemed to be drowning in wave after wave of stark humiliation.

At last the cleaning was done, but the rooms seemed to suffocate her. She went out on the porch to gaze out across the basin to the stately, solemn peaks which hemmed it in, and to the knife-edged gap through them that was Bunton's Pass. Her mind busy with the depressing thoughts which crowded her brain, she overlooked a horseman who had ridden up to the corrals and dismounted. In

fact, he had walked up the path to within two rods of her before she saw him. She gave a convulsive start, half-started to retreat, and then, with the courage of desperation, went to meet him.

Ormond swung his hat in his hand, and bowed gravely. She scarcely saw the movement. All she wanted was to get the agony over as soon as possible.

"Did you meet my father?" she breathed.

"I did," he said slowly.

"Did he—did he tell you—what I told him to tell you?" she asked.

Not for worlds would he humiliate her by an affirmative answer.

"I'm afraid not," he lied. "Unfortunately your father and I had words as soon as we met. Was it something important?"

"Had you—had you told what you knew?" she faltered.

"I told the sheriff where the stolen cattle could be found, and also who the men were who worked with your father. I presume some of them will confess. Your father seemed to think so."

"Then—my father will—hang," she said slowly, but in spite of herself, a sigh of relief escaped her. At any rate she would not have to put herself on the auction block again.

"I believe he stands a very good chance to get away," he said encouragingly. "He at least will have a few hours' start."

Floss dropped to a seat on the porch, and hid her face in her hands. She had loved her father once.

Now she found it almost impossible to feel any sorrow for him, or resentment toward the man who was responsible for his lawlessness being found out. What she wanted most was some place where she could crawl in and nurse her hurt pride like a wounded animal. After a bit she looked up, and he was still standing there.

"I'm going now," he said softly; "but first I want to tell you I have been here under false pretences. My name——"

"Is Joe Arthur?" she questioned, almost eagerly.

"You've heard, then, that I went under that name?"

She nodded. "Is it your real name?"

"No. My real name happens to be—Joe Ormond."

"Then——" she faltered. Mark Brown had said that this man, under the name of Joe Ormond, was wanted for bank robbery in New Mexico.

"This," he began slowly, "is an isolated place. If there is a place where a fugitive from justice could hide in safety it is in Cache Basin. I came here as Joe Arthur. Then I met you, and I heard your father express his contempt for any man who went under an assumed name; a sentiment which you plainly shared. Though I was wanted for bank robbery, I gave my real name; preferring to risk discovery rather than deceive you. And, to be perfectly frank, I was tired of wandering."

"How long," she asked, "since this—this bank robbery?"

"Four years."

"And you still had enough money to be—an educational philanthropist?"

"I had twenty thousand dollars when I came here," he said, a barely perceptible grin on his face. "I dreamed that with that money, and this ideal cow country—and you—I might find contentment. But things seem to have gone wrong."

"My life has been spent with one criminal; I want nothing to do with another," the girl cried, a note of distress in her voice.

"I don't know how I was traced in here, but I felt that it would come sometime. That is why I returned to-day. I want you to know the truth. I never robbed a bank in my life. Will you listen?"

"Gladly," she replied.

"Four years ago I and my brother Fred, two years younger than I, sold our cattle ranch in New Mexico for forty thousand dollars. We couldn't agree. Fred considered a forty thousand dollar outfit a mere bagatelle, and me a mere piker. There never was a thing malicious about Fred, but he was irresponsible and easily led—by the wrong sort of people. The upshot of the business was that Fred went through his money, was persuaded to help rob a bank, and came to the ranch where I was staying, with a posse hot on his heels. The only way they could guess who he was was because he had borrowed one of my horses. He was in a complete panic when he arrived, and the situation demanded clear thinking. There was no real harm

in Fred, and he had learned his lesson." Joe's mind was obviously half-buried in the past as he talked.

"And you?" Floss asked, her eyes glistening.

"I happened to have a fresh horse saddled, and those of the posse were winded. I got away, and went under the name of Joe Arthur until I came here," he explained simply.

"Oh!" was all she could find to say.

"Now you know I'm not as bad as you thought I was, but it was rotten of me to—to say the things I did, when any moment I might be arrested. Now I'll be going, and I'm more sorry than I can ever tell that I have caused you pain."

He turned and strode down the path toward his horse, while the girl's eyes followed him lingeringly. With the sure, supple grace she had so often admired, he threw the bridle reins over his horse's neck and placed his foot in the stirrup.

Suddenly she awakened to the fact that the crucial moment of both their lives had arrived.

"Joe," she called softly and wistfully.

With anxious, inquiring eyes he walked back to meet her.

"Joe," she half-whispered, "this is a safe place to hide. I happen to know that only two people beside myself know who you are, and both of them will keep still if I ask it."

"Then you really want me to stay?" he asked, astonished.

The wave of rich colour that flowed over neck and face was sufficient answer.

"No matter what happens," she said bravely.

He opened his arms, and she slid gently inside them. He had the answer he had been waiting and searching for for years, as her soft arms stole around his neck.

"You remember, dear," he said presently, "the postscript on the letter from Galt that you read? It said, 'Here is a clipping that may interest you.' Galt did not know before he got the letter I mailed in your post office that my name was Joe Ormond."

From an inside pocket he produced the worn clipping and handed it to her.

"Read it when you have more time," he advised. "It says, to put it briefly, that Fred Ormond was thrown from a horse and fatally injured. And, before dying, he made a complete confession of robbing that bank in New Mexico. I won't need an alias any more."

Floss looked up and smiled happily.

"Any name that is good enough for you is good enough for me," she declared proudly.

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Author of *Timber Trail*, etc.

SIX-GUN JUSTICE

PLACER CITY was a played-out mining town full of Chinese gleaning the diggings and a few desperate white men still panning madly for the little gold that was left. A town of saloons and dance halls and low-down joints, yet it was to Placer City that Benson took Miss Fletcher and her father for safety. Benson had been with the gang from the Smalley outfit, who aimed to put old Fletcher with his little herd off the grassland. Suddenly the injustice of it struck him, perhaps because he had seen Miss Fletcher. At any rate, Benson turned on Burton, the Smalley boss, took his horse and sent him away with his hands up. But Burton was no man to make an enemy of. Of the six men only one had stuck by Burton, but Benson knew that the whole Smalley gang would be after him by nightfall; so he took the Fletchers to Placer City. And that is just the beginning of a yarn that has as many thrills as there are pages in the book.

NEW 7/6 WILD WEST NOVELS

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

Author of *Murder in the North-West*, etc.

HERD RIDERS

CAL GARFORD, uncrowned king of the cattle country, held up and marched at the point of a revolver to the sheriff's office! The situation seemed absurd; not that Garford had no enemies, but that this enemy should be some one he had never seen before, and a girl at that. The only thing to do was to hear her charge put before the sheriff and to clear up the mistake; so Cal made no bid for freedom. Fortunately, two of his range-riders were there, for neither the sheriff nor his deputy were likely to miss an opportunity, however ridiculous the charge, of getting Garford in their power. The girl, Hazel Struthers, complained that the previous night Garford had entered her home, armed and masked, and after demanding food, had ridden off mysteriously into the darkness. But the two boys were there with their alibi, which the sheriff had to accept, and so the matter ended. But for Cal things were only beginning; this girl had awakened a new interest in him, and he had seen, too, that there were dangerous enemies threatening his supremacy. Mr. Sanders tells this tale of the cattle country with his usual virile sense of adventure, that never fails to quicken a reader's pulse.

ROBERT AMES BENNET

Author of *Sunnie of Timberline*, etc.

CAUGHT IN THE WILD

MR. RAMILL, the millionaire, with his daughter Lilith, and her fiancé, Vivian Huxby, taxi in their white-winged monoplane into the Commercial Airways emergency depot on the MacKenzie. It was Garth who helped them to moor, and it was Garth who tempted them with his "poke" of platinum nodules to make the flight to his prospect in the Northern Rockies. Ramill and Huxby seemed straight enough. They could afford to accept his terms, and no doubt would. But up in that sub-arctic valley, when they saw the value of his "strike," their attitude changed. Huxby was ready to shoot, but Garth held the trump card. He let the plane drift to its destruction over a cataract at the foot of the lake. Now he could make his own terms. He alone could guide those three pampered creatures of civilisation out of the wild in which they were caught. Mr. Bennet's story of the struggle of those four against rigorous nature and the conflicting emotions of love and gold-lust is amongst the most memorable of all his open-air romances.

NEW 7/6 WILD WEST NOVELS

ROBERT AMES BENNET

Author of *The Hunted Wolf*, etc.

THE DEADWOOD TRAIL

THE boys had promised Jim that they would keep off the liquor while they were in town. They decided to blow their wages on a circus instead. But Curly McCall's gang was up in town too, spoiling for a bit of gun play. Near the end of the show they galloped into the ring screeching and yelling. Curly was after the lady rider, who was half-way through her act; but Buck Hatly wasn't standing for that. He said so, and just naturally guns came out. Then into the big tent came Buffalo Bill Cody and two others. Without even drawing a gun he restored law and order, but the seeds of rivalry were sown, and a man had lost his heart when next day they were all out on the plain again. To read this new Bennet Western is as exhilarating as a gallop on an autumn morning. He has gone back to the real West—the West of Buffalo Bill, when Indians roamed the prairie, and the last of the shaggy herds was falling to the hunter.

ROBERT J. HORTON

Author of *The Trail of the Buzzard*, etc.

RIDERS OF PARADISE

PARADISE VALLEY, a luscious grazing ground for countless cattle, was rapidly becoming a health resort. Rustling was on the decline; "shoot-ups" almost unknown. The sheriff played cribbage all day and slept undisturbed o' nights. Yet old Andrew French, wealthy cattle-baron and owner of the Two Bar F ranch, was uneasy—his son Clinton had achieved local fame as a crack shot and wanted to keep his eye in training. When Clinton's twin brother Richard arrived from the East to spend vacation on the ranch, the two youths, bent on adventure, sought an early opportunity of visiting the nearest township. There they fell foul of Blunt Rodgers, a gunman and member of the Bangers' Gang. Rodgers is shot, and Paradise Valley is no longer peaceful. Mr. Horton gives us a full-blooded story that vibrates with the sharp staccato of gun-fire and the thunder of horses' hoofs.

